

Civil Society



EXCLUSIVE: HOW BUREAUCRATS ALMOST KILLED RTI

WHAT'S HIDDEN IN GOVT FILES?



FROM COLA WARS TO COLA TALKS?

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IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS

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TAXMAN'S BURDEN

Amassed in an effort to fight the information. Can he bring transparency to India?

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A CM'S ACTIVISM

Is Delhi a better place to live in?

YES 65% NO 29%

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ELECTION SPECIAL



NGOs IN POLITICS

They are checking out candidates. Is it time they stood for election themselves?

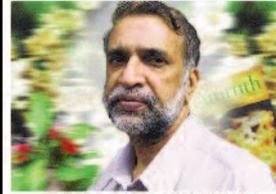
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YOUTH 4 PEACE

Young people across cities join bands against violence and communal hatred

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MEET Mr ROOTS

Darsban Shankar revives health traditions, plans Ayurveda hospital in Bangalore

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GURGAON WANTS TO VOTE

...but in India's fastest growing city poll lists are not updated

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THE FOREST CRUNCH

Demand for paper is growing but where are the trees?

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AN AGENDA FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT

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SHOWDOWN IN MANALI

A 192 MW hydel power project, with 42 government clearances in its name, runs into trouble. But NCCo find a solution in impartial public hearings

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IS IT BEYOND BUSINESS?

Senior IIR professionals have been working with NGOs. But can they get companies to think differently?

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HIPPOCAMPUS

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NEW LEADERS

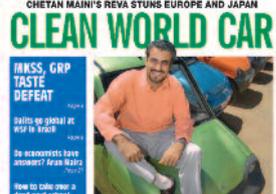
Grassroots groups of Dalits, Muslims, Muslims and other people form a number of collective action cells and NGOs

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A MIDDLE CLASS PARTY IN GURGAON

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CLEAN WORLD CAR

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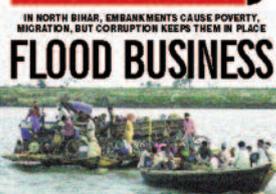
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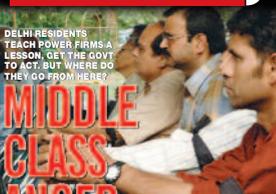
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WHAT IS A WORLD CLASS CITY?

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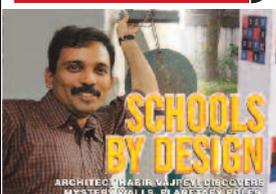
TOP DOCTORS IN SLUM

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WHEN THE GOVT WANTS YOUR HOUSE

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SCHOOLS BY DESIGN

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NAXAL REALITY

A citizen's report by Harivansh PLUS The Gondwana Tribal Party Interview with Ramchandra Gaba

SOMEONE

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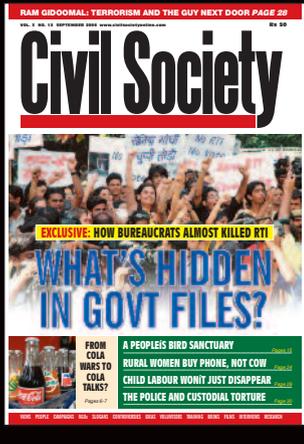
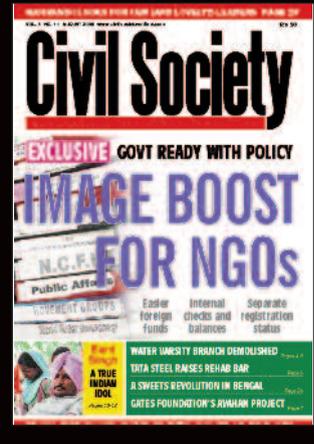
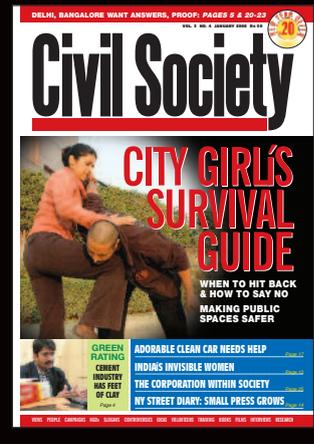
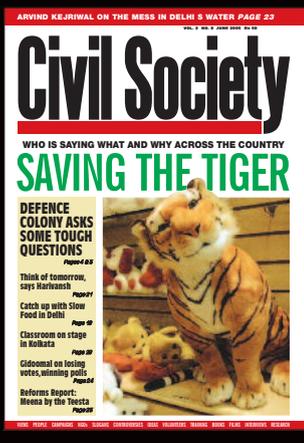
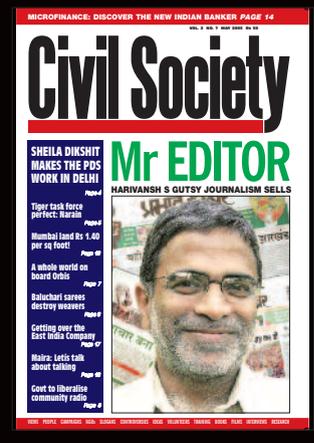
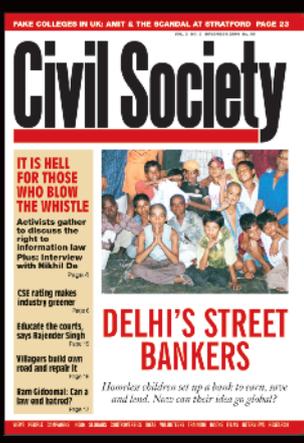
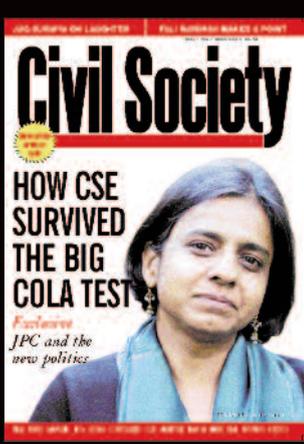
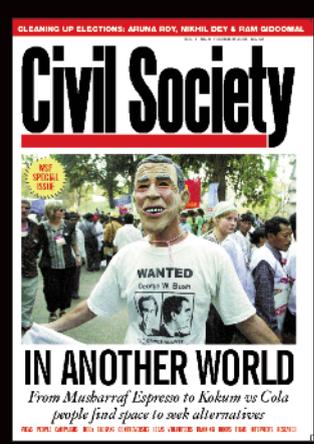
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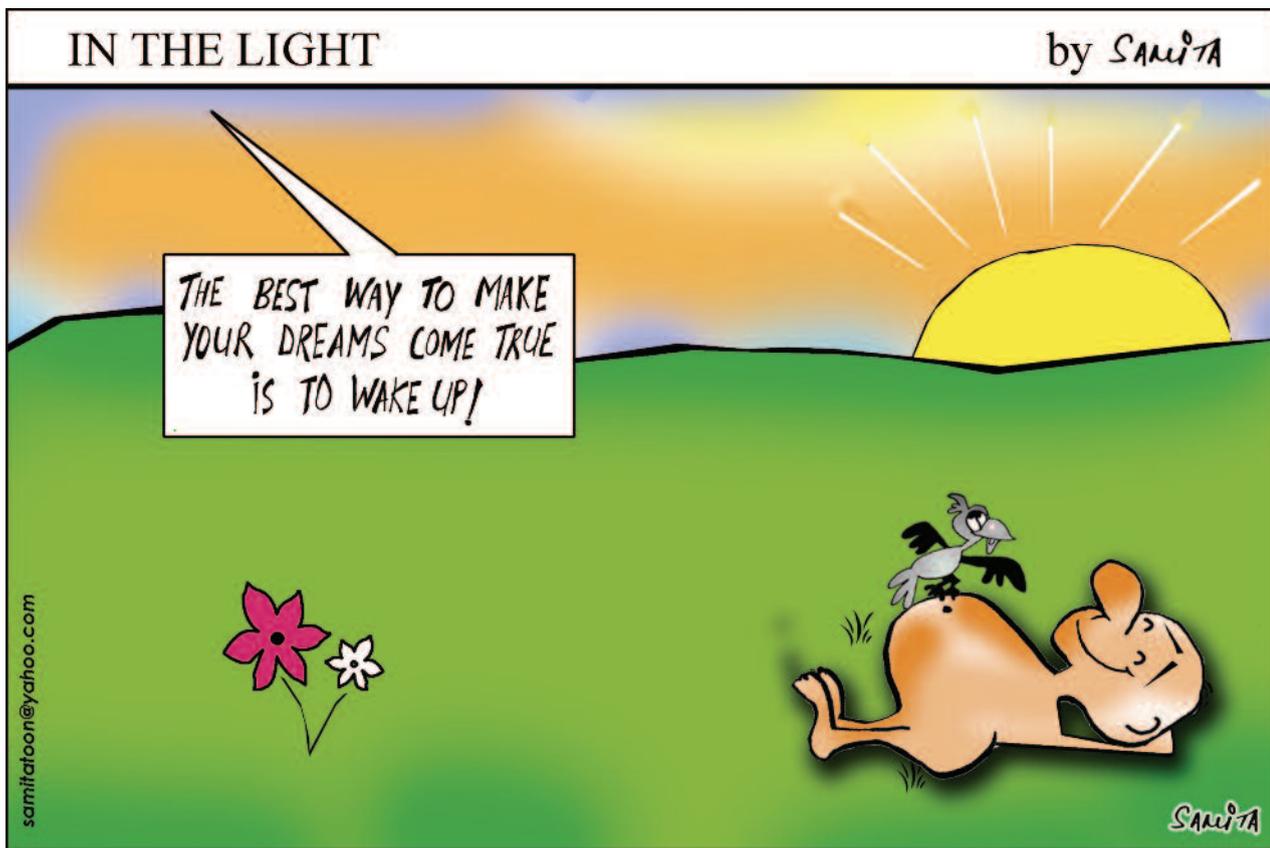
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“
If people can buy products after spending good money, they can test them. Everywhere there is public scrutiny of products because people don't trust what companies tell them. Consumers have the right to test products. It happens all over the US.”

Chandra Bhushan,
Centre for Science and Environment,
defending its tests on Coke and Pepsi

Rural programmes don't work

I have grave doubts that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme discussed in Milindo Chakrabarti's article "Keeping tabs on job guarantee" is going to succeed. There have been many such schemes in the past launched with great fanfare but none delivered. There is a full-fledged bulky department called Rural Development and it keeps launching one or the other rural development programme but the sad fact is that there is no change in the condition of the rural poor. Crores of rupees earmarked for their welfare in every Plan line the pockets of politicians and bureaucrats. If you really want to uplift the rural poor, don't give them fish but teach them how to fish.

Pankhuri Gupta

Instead of war, let's talk

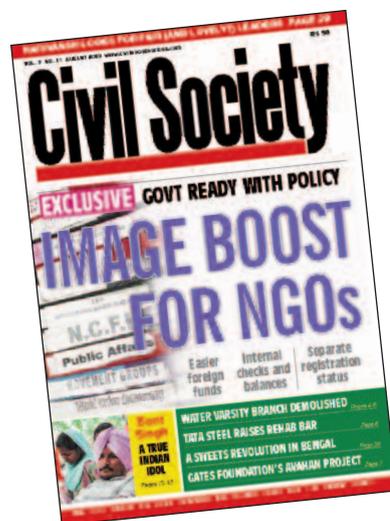
'Mumbai blasts to London bombings,' by Ram Gidoomal correctly diagnoses the problem. The need of the hour, as he has so succinctly put it, is for ordinary people to talk to each other across community barriers. But this is not happening. Instead bombs are hurled on the hapless populace of the Middle East. Violence has never solved any problem. It has always created more problems. It is high time both parties sat across and talked to see how these can be solved without innocent civilians being made to pay the price.

Kanika Agrawal

Keep out bad characters

I agree completely with Harivansh (Inside Politics) that there is an

LETTERS



urgent need to rescue the state and its machinery from petty politics that has thrown up detestable leaders like Amar Singh and others. The best way would be to do away with the system of universal adult suffrage that we currently have. It is primarily responsible for electing criminals and other bad characters to state assemblies and the Lok Sabha. Voting rights should be given only to those who have predetermined minimum qualifications. This may sound impractical but if tried in right earnest might rid our politics of criminals.

Riya Sharma

Israel strong, Arabs weak

Riaz Quadir's 'Doublespeak game on Lebanon' made interesting reading but the problem is who is going to bell the cat. Not the Arab mice for sure. Arab nations have to realise that Israel with the full backing of the US and the EU is a very formidable foe and should not be

provoked. Arab nations may have the support of other nations but then these countries do not really count much. So it is in the Arab nations own interest to sit together with Israel, the US and EU to find a lasting solution to the problem in the Middle East that keeps rearing its head every now and then to claim the blood of innocents.

Pinky Chawla

Drive against bribes

I fully agree with the observation in the article, 'Drive against bribes gets rolling,' that the media played an important role in the recent campaign launched in Delhi. Awareness is indeed spreading and people have started asserting their rights. This needs to be sustained and continued support of the media is very vital. Your magazine, I am glad to mention, has been in the forefront of this matter.

Saurabh Kumar

Good magazine

Yours is a beautiful magazine. It's a pleasure and an honour to read it. I often wonder where you come from and who you all are! Do not let the paper and print quality deteriorate.

Lt Col (retd) J B S Claire

Credibility matters

It is good to know that the government has finally drafted a policy for the voluntary sector. In Kolkata many NGOs have sprung up in the last few years. While some do good work there are others one feels uncertain about. It would be useful if some rating of standards was worked out for the sector. If an NGO is recognised as a worthy one it would attract more people to its cause. Credibility is very important.

Subhash Mukherji

“
I don't really think about the commercial or publishing world or what other people want. I write for myself. And I try and encourage writers, when I'm teaching, to work like that. There's something about your own voice that has a sort of power.”

Hanif Kureishi, Writer

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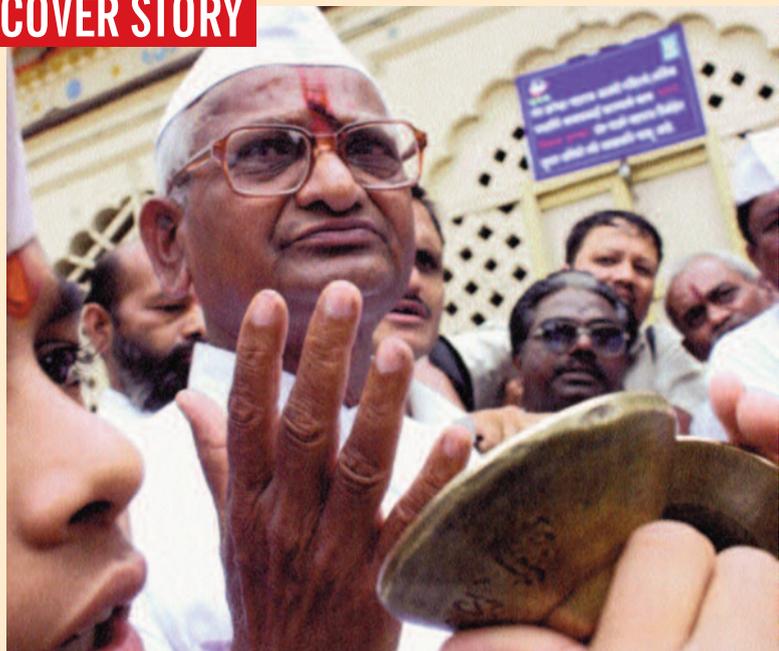
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COVER STORY



WHAT'S IN GOVT FILES?

Opposition from activists stops the govt from watering down the powerful RTI Act. But will India's mighty bureaucracy push through amendments again?

17

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The Railway Protection Force is big daddy to homeless children **9**

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Civil Society

Fighting for the right to know

It is difficult to believe that changes in a law as important as the Right to Information Act could be worked on, cleared by the Union Cabinet and almost passed by Parliament without the political leadership of the country realising what was going on.

RTI campaigners who say Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was misled by senior bureaucrats surely can't be serious. They are perhaps trying to keep a door open with the top UPA leaders, which is a good thing and perfectly understandable.

The problems with implementing RTI, however, run much deeper. The acceptance of transparency will vary depending on who is involved. Grassroots activists like Anna Hazare will insist on complete openness, which is excellent for the rights of the ordinary citizen. It should be the wish of all of us that governments are completely accessible and accountable.

The Prime Minister on the other hand will want to temper RTI such that he can perform the balancing act that his office demands of him. In all fairness you can't blame him. Then there will also be honest bureaucrats who will worry about the imponderables of too much access. Finally, there are the vast number of corrupt politicians and officers who have worked in tandem without honour. They, of course, will want no transparency at all because it puts an end to their thieving.

All these elements coalesced in one way or the other to seek to push through the amendments to RTI. Campaigners will clearly have to work much harder if they want to quickly change the system.

Many groups like the MKSS and Parivartan have done much to popularise RTI. But the fact is that the RTI Act fell like manna from the National Advisory Council (NAC). If the amendments have been withdrawn this time it is also because of Sonia Gandhi and the Congress' concern over the political implications of Anna Hazare's fast in Maharashtra. From him it is necessary to learn the importance of staying close to the ground and having political relevance.

To this extent RTI has received only a temporary reprieve. It will be under attack again and Anna better be at hand to defend it.

Three years ago, when we came up with the idea of this magazine and decided in a flash of exuberance to launch it, we didn't in those heady moments have any hesitation in putting Arvind Kejriwal on our cover.

No one thought then, least of all the shy Arvind Kejriwal, that he would win the Magsaysay Award, as he has done this year, for his work. But he was instantly remarkable, an income tax officer trying to implement the right to information – and that too among slum-dwellers in Sundernagari in east Delhi. We called our first cover story "Taxman's Burden".

We saw in the inherent contradiction of his situation – an income tax officer seeking to empower ordinary people to take on the government – a sign of our changing times. To us, the future lay in many such Arvinds. It still does because the process of change is complex.

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Coke breaks the ice with CSE

But your kids will still get colas that the world is rejecting

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A month after the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) found cold drinks it had tested unfit for human consumption because of the high levels of pesticide they contained, there were indications that the feisty NGO and the Coca-Cola Company were preparing for a dialogue.

The initiative came from Coca-Cola in a letter to Sunita Narain, CSE's director. The company said it shared concerns over the presence of pesticides in beverages and foodstuff and was ready to work with

But an eagerness to sit at the same table indicates a change of strategy at least on the part of Coca-Cola.

One reason for the shift could be the decision of several state governments to ban Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Kerala was the first to act, followed by Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. They have conducted tests that confirm CSE's findings.

But a yet bigger reason is perhaps the increasing rejection of cold drinks in other markets and among educated Indians because of the perception that they harm health. The pesticide controversy adds to the negative image that the two companies have been

their local corporate leadership keep talking about how their drinks are world class. They don't tell Indians the stories of rejection in other markets or the opprobrium heaped on their brands on American campuses.

Rajiv Bakshi, who heads Pepsi in India, was on TV recently promising that his products are as good as what the company sells elsewhere in the world. The same gentleman was on TV three years ago, taking a pledge before Prannoy Roy that Pepsi's products were perfectly safe and world class. That was shortly after CSE conducted its first tests and went public with its results. On its part Coca-Cola has been putting out

LAKSHMAN ANAND

advertisements saying that its drinks are safe, much like it did three years ago.

Coke and Pepsi spend millions of dollars on their advertising. Media houses are beholden to them. They even manage to get mentioned in the budget speech of the Union finance minister. If chief ministers want to be seen as being investment friendly, they had better watch what they say.

So, these are very powerful emblems of corporate America. But in a world shrunk by Internet and television, word gets around fast. There is only so much that big adspends and lobbying budgets will deliver.

The day CSE was to announce the results of its tests, every TV channel turned up for the press conference. Cables snaked their way up to the fourth floor of the India Habitat Centre in Delhi where the CSE laboratory is located.

That evening the pesticides in cola story was on every telecast. Next morning it was on the front page of every page.

Claims of being world class cut no ice. Nor did criticism of CSE's laboratory. Independent testing by consumer groups is common the world over. People trust these findings more than corporate claims.

What did CSE find in the bottles it tested? There were cocktails of three to five pesticides that were on average 24 times higher than safe limits. A sample from Kolkata showed the presence of Lindane 140 times higher.

CSE had collected 57 samples of 11 soft drink brands from 25 manufacturing plants of Coca-Cola and Pepsi spread over 12 states.

CSE first tested colas three years ago. The current tests show that their quality has actually deteriorated. Worse still, CSE says Coca-Cola and Pepsi have in these three years been disrupting work in BIS.

Such were the pressures exerted on the FAD 14 sectional committee in BIS that it was decided to keep an audio recording of the proceedings. On one occasion the committee's chairman, Dr AS Bawa, a respected Indian scientist who heads the Defence Food Research Laboratory in Mysore, had to walk



Chandra Bhushan

CSE in finding ways to solve the problem.

Narain replied to Atul Singh, Coca-Cola's CEO in India, that she would be happy to meet him. But she emphasised that the talks would have to be on the regulations framed by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) over the past three years.

Coca-Cola and Pepsi have been accused by CSE of blocking the BIS norms though they have been drafted impartially by some of the best scientific talent in the country. Both companies have been part of the BIS deliberations.

Would a dialogue between CSE and Coca-Cola break the logjam? It is a difficult question to answer. But as Civil Society went to press, an exchange of letters was the state of play.

In the past, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have refused to talk to CSE, though the NGO itself has been open to a dialogue. The companies have repeatedly challenged CSE's findings and called them unscientific though a high-level parliamentary probe has given CSE flying marks.

Coca-Cola and Pepsi continue to publicly flay CSE.

acquiring.

In California, Arnold Schwarzenegger has thought nothing of banning them in schools. So full are colas of empty calories that they are a threat to the health of American children who are already suffering from problems of obesity.

In India, the cold drinks also have unacceptable caffeine levels together with the sugar and chemicals that other markets have begun rejecting and protecting younger generations from.

It is common now for doctors in India to caution families against letting the young consume too many cold drinks. But high voltage advertising campaigns featuring stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Aamir Khan, Sharukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai have children guzzling cold drinks all the time.

Clearly, the question that the corporate leadership of Coca-Cola and Pepsi must answer is why they agree to pull out of schools in America, but promote their drinks among children of the same age groups in India.

On the contrary, both Coca-Cola and Pepsi and

LAKSHMAN ANAND



out in disgust.

Even as BIS officials tried to do their job, Coca-Cola and Pepsi used political pressure to defer a product standard. As the norms were finalised and ready to be issued, the Union health ministry mysteriously intervened at the eleventh hour. It said it was studying pesticide traces in sugar and its opinion in this matter should be taken into account before a standard is delayed.

Tests on more than 400 samples of refined sugar have already been done. They show negligible traces of pesticide. The problem, everyone is agreed is with water, which Coke and Pepsi refuse to clean because it means making considerable investments.

What is CSE all about and how solid is its work? Sunita Narain, as director, is best known for taking on the cola giants. But CSE, which was founded by the visionary Anil Agarwal, runs deep. It has got a lot of young and talented people working for it. See *Civil Society* March 2004: HOW CSE SURVIVED THE BIG COLA TEST.

Narain has been all over TV and the papers. What about the others at CSE? Since the credibility of its laboratory has often been questioned, *Civil Society* spoke to CSE's Associate Director, Chandra Bhushan, who heads the NGO's Green Rating Project and directs the work of the laboratory.

An engineer by training, Chandra Bhushan has had sustained interactions with the paper, chlor-alkali, automobile and cement industries while rating them.

Senior people across these industries speak respectfully of Chandra Bhushan, praising his

“End product standards are needed. It is only this that the consumer can test. The consumer can't go after each and every ingredient”

understanding of science, objectivity and honesty. Excerpts from a long interview.

Coke and Pepsi have said that your laboratory at CSE is not good enough to test their products.

Our laboratory is accredited with the ISO 9001: 2000 quality management system. Secondly, the laboratory has confirmed the presence of pesticides in the colas using state of the art equipment – the GC-MS.

We went to a very reputable Swiss agency called SWISO to ensure that our laboratory meets all standards. Today if anyone from anywhere in the world comes to our laboratory they will give accreditation.

But you don't have government accreditation.

We don't want it either. Our experience has been that the government works in tandem with companies like Coke and Pepsi. If you have accreditation from the government today and tomorrow and they don't like the results you are putting out they take your

accreditation away and that leaves you nowhere. Surely an ISO rating is good enough.

No, but the point Coke and Pepsi seem to be making is that people don't have the right to test the colas. They should be tested by government or corporate laboratories, is what they are saying.

If people can buy products after spending good money, they can test them. Everywhere there is public scrutiny of products because people don't trust what companies tell them. Consumers have the right to test products. It happens all over the US. California has a very strong system of public testing.

This is why we say end product standards are needed. It is only this that the consumer can test. The consumer can't go after each and every ingredient.

When the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) investigated our findings of 2003 they came to the conclusion that they were corrected. In fact, the JPC appreciated CSE's role as a whistleblower.

But people are confused. Coke has just gone and got its bottles tested in a UK laboratory, which has said that they are fine and can be consumed. Is that an unreliable lab that Coke has gone to?

No. It is a good lab. But there are many things wrong with the way in which the tests were conducted.

First of all, the samples were chosen by Coca-Cola itself. If they say their products are okay, let anyone choose the samples. Why the need for this manipulation? Secondly, the laboratory hasn't used a known methodology. We have used USEPA methodology.

Thirdly, the UK lab has not used the correct equipment for detecting pesticides in ppb. Its use of HPLC is wrong. Finally, we have confirmed it with the UK government that the scientists who spoke for Coca-Cola were working as consultants for them. They weren't representing the laboratory though they belong to it.

You say it is the water that is blame for the pesticides in the drink.

Yes we believe it is the water and not the sugar as the companies are making it out to be. Tests with more than 470 samples show that pesticide residue in refined sugar is negligible.

If it is the water, it is easy enough to fix. Why don't the companies do it and save their brands from this embarrassment? They already do it for bottled water.

The bottled water and the cold drinks plants are separate. To clean up the water will require an investment of at least Rs 5 crore per plant. For the 80 plus plants that the two companies have, the investment could be to the tune of Rs 500 crores. They don't want to make this investment.

AN APPEAL

of the Narmada.

As envisaged by the NBA, the increased height of the Sardar Sarovar dam has brought about destruction and devastation. As the waters rose very quickly entire villages were submerged in just two hours.

The impact was felt up to Nimad over 120 km from the dam site. The backwaters of the dam submerged almost all the villages in Maharashtra. Heavy rains even devastated new resettlement sites.

While the NBA continues its struggle to force the government to implement rehabilitation on the ground it also has to ensure the immediate survival needs of the people.

NBA requests all concerned individuals and organisations to participate in this action by urgently donating for relief to those worst-affected by the illegal submergence, without prior rehabilitation.

Six hundred most needy families have been identified and NBA is providing emergency relief of food grains worth Rs 1000 and two tarpaulins per family. As farms with standing crops have been submerged, long-term relief measures will have to be taken. The submerged Jeevanshalas or residential schools set up by the NBA also have to be relocated and rebuilt.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has started an emergency relief programme called Jansahayog for the people of the Narmada Valley whose homes, cattle and stocks of grain were washed away by the rising waters

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Scorched land now verdant campus

Purba Kalita
Jodhpur

VARUN Arya, director of the Aravali Institute of Management (AIM) in Jodhpur, wanted a new, spacious campus for his institute. All he had were 100 barren acres without a blade of grass 46 km away. The land was a vast stretch of salt and granite with a hillock. No chance of any trees growing there, for sure. As for water, the area was steeped in salt.

"In my 20 years of service I had not come across such saline land," says Pradeep Chaudhry, conservator of forests of the Arid Forest Research Institute (AFRI), Jodhpur. "The tanks had been dug up. I saw yellowish water at the bottom. It was an unpleasant sight. I put a drop of that on my tongue and it tasted like concentrated hydrochloric acid."

Today, the same land has six lakes gurgling with water. Three thousand trees are planned. Species that can survive harsh conditions have been short-listed. AIM's new campus will be constructed with old, forgotten techniques that used lime, sand and coal tar to withstand salt ingressions.

Arya spent his childhood working in small shops and pulling a cart. But he did well in school and that trajectory took him to IIT, Delhi and then to IIM, Ahmedabad, where he paid his way through with a loan from the State Bank of India. In 1999, he chucked his Rs 2 lakh per month job at DuPont to set up AIM.

"When I was in the corporate world, I wanted to recruit people from Rajasthan but compared to other students, they fell behind. To bring them to the level of



Varun Arya

competence, I decided to start AIM," says Arya who also helped begin the Amity Business School in Noida, considered one of the better private B-Schools in India.

At the new site Arya plans to establish, besides the management school, an engineering and science college, a commerce and arts college, a 10-plus-two school, a prayer and meditation centre as well as residential complexes. "One year from now my students will be learning at this site," declares Arya. The entire project will be completed in 10 years, he says.

The salinity of the land will be turned into its strength. "We will set up a salt factory. Management students will work there in shifts and get hands-on experience about the industry," says the indomitable Arya.

And how did 100 acres of hopeless land change overnight?

Arya called in India's waterman Rajender Singh, to spin some magic. Singh, leader of the Tarun Bharat Sangh, is famous for transforming parched lands into wet zones through rainwater harvesting. "When I visited the site, I realised how anyone could be intimidated seeing white layers of salt on the surface," says Singh.

But he surveyed the land and pronounced there was hope. Salinity was maximum on the surface, he explained. "I tasted the water on rocks below the surface and found that at some places it did not taste so salty. Therefore I decided to dig deep (12-15 ft)."

This monsoon the lakes are overflowing with rainwater, enough to last till the next year's monsoon. "It took less than an hour for the lakes to get filled," recalls Arya. "It's such a different feeling now. When we came to the site last year, we felt like running away unable to bear the terrible heat," recalls site architect, Rajesh Sharma. "Now it's become a picnic spot," adds a delighted Arya.

The excitement is infectious and you quickly taste the water. And bingo! There is no trace of salinity.

Pessimists say after four to nine months the water will turn saline. But Singh dismisses such ideas. "*Paani khaara bilkul nahin hoga*" (the water will not turn saline). A composed Arya says, "Let's wait and watch. With problems come solutions."

Arya has spent close to Rs 20 lakh on the lakes but Singh says for neighbouring villages to replicate such structures the cost will be lower. "The design will be different. The ones for the institute have been planned keeping aesthetics in mind."

A green blueprint has been drawn up. "I would have advised against any plantation on the land had it not been for an educational institute," says Dr Ranjana Arya, senior scientist and head, non-wood forest product at AFRI. She explains that the soil depth is only between 25 cm and 40 cm. For forestry a soil depth of 60 cm is required.

But scientists are tiding over such snags. Both AFRI and the Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI), Jodhpur have selected salt tolerant species. These include the indigenous *Salvador persica* (*Khara jaal*), *Cassia siamea*, *Pongamia* (*Karanj*), *Tamarix* (*Pharash*), *Bougainvillea*, the exotic Australian *Acacia ampliceps*, *Acacia nilotica*, *Termenallia catappa*, *Parkinsonia* and *Neem*.

Pits measuring one cubic metre have been dug and filled with soil of good quality. Vermi-compost, farm manure and gypsum, say scientists, could help balance the saline soil. Saplings have been planted at a one metre distance from each other. The *peepal* saplings failed. Others are braving it out. Dr Arya says it is difficult to predict which trees will survive. "Which plants should be grown more will depend on success rates," she says.

Arya and Sharma have been undertaking a lot of exploration. "We went to Sambhar Lake and Phagi in Jaipur to study the kind of structures that could withstand salt ingressions. We saw a building fall apart in Phagi because of salt," recalls Arya.

Villagers, Arya says, advocate the use of *mudia*, a mixture of lime and sand. It was used to build the 500-year-old Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur. So Arya and Sharma got lime from Nagore, 150 km from Jodhpur. Since this ancient form of construction is almost non-existent because of its high cost and the presence of newer and quicker technologies, the machine to process *mudia* has to be made to order. Earlier, camels ran such machines. Arya uses a tractor. The foundation will be built with *mudia* up to plinth level.

For the building, an 'arch foundation' is being considered to minimise areas of contact. A visit to Swami Maheshwarananda's Ashram at Jadan in Pali district provided great insight. "There we saw how liquid coal tar formed a barrier wherever construction came in contact with the ground," explains Sharma. In addition, measures like DPC or damp proof course, they say, will also be carried out extensively.

NIF AD
LAST ISSUE



Divisional Railway Manager Shakeel Ahmed (left) and Senior DSC A N Sinha (right) with boys at sports meet.

RPF is big daddy to homeless children

Rina Mukherji
Kharagpur

EVERY railway station has its share of destitute, homeless children. Clad in tatters, dusty and dirty they clamber on to trains to clean compartments, sell knick-knacks, polish shoes or just beg.

Commuters find them a nuisance and often complain to the railway authorities who then ask the police to clear the platform of these children.

In 2003, it struck Divisional Security Commissioner K Arul Jyothi of the Railway Protection Force (RPF) in Malda that a non-formal school could be set up for railway children to keep them off platforms.

His idea blossomed into the Mukhtangan project that provides education and shelter to 500 railway children. The project has expanded from Malda railway station to the Asansol and Kharagpur stations. There are plans to replicate it in Tatanagar, New Jalpaiguri, Mughalsarai and Bilaspur.

Although most children end up on railway stations after being abandoned or orphaned there are many who just got lost. At the Kharagpur railway station, for instance, there is Pradeep who says he is from Ambarnath in Mumbai. He speaks fairly good English and is intelligent at picking up languages and games. Homeless since the last eight years, he boarded the wrong train on a day out with friends and landed up in Durg. From there, he somehow found his way to Tatanagar where he spent many years under the care of an elderly beggar woman, before striking out on his own.

Tahajur is a physically disabled boy who was abandoned by his father. Two years ago when his stepmother moved in with his family at Kenduara

basti near Panchkura on the Howrah route, Tahajur was turned out. Since then he has been earning some money by begging. His friend, 17-year-old Firoz, carries him around. Firoz left his home in Murshidabad after a fight. He started enjoying his independence and does not want to return.

To get its idea off the ground, the RPF sought help from Praajak, an NGO that works with railway children. "We realised that these children shunned restrictions. They valued their independence and mobility and were proud of being earners. We hence left it to their discretion to come and go as they liked," explains Abhinav Jha, Praajak office-bearer and coordinator of the Kharagpur arm of the project. The RPF-Praajak effort was aptly named the Mukhtangan (Open Courtyard) Child Protection Project.

It was decided to provide the children with some education, night shelters and bathrooms. These facilities turned out to be a big draw.

The night shelter was open from 8.30 pm till 8 am. From 8 am to 12 pm the children were free to earn their living on the railway station. After that they could visit the drop-in centre for non-formal classes. From 4 pm to 6 pm sports and games were organised for them.

In the three years that Mukhtangan has been working in Malda, the railway children have learnt to be hygienic and not eat discarded food served on trains. They do collect unused food and aluminium foil, especially since foil fetches Rs 80 per kg in the market.

At Kharagpur, which is this region's biggest railway sub-division, Mukhtangan caters to 40 railway children. There is a centre with a non-formal school and a night shelter equipped with games like carom located within the RPF barracks complex.

Once a week, the children pool their earnings for

a community feast.

There is also an annual sports meet for railway children from all the centres. This has encouraged healthy competition and camaraderie.

In April 2005, when the project was started at Kharagpur, sensitisation programmes were conducted for constables and officers of the police force. Every RPF employee spends time interacting with the children when they are free.

Children who used to be accused of stealing now return lost goods. "These children have already returned a couple of mobiles to us for restoring to their owners," says AN Sinha, Senior Divisional Security Commissioner (Kharagpur Division).

At Malda, a bag of jewellery and valuables belonging to a businessman were recently handed over to the RPF by one of the children.

The RPF no longer sees the children as 'anti-social elements'. "They now look upon themselves as responsible for the well-being of these children, rather than as objects of awe that the children would fear and dread," says Sinha.

The children too don't shun the RPF. If they dislike a constable for being harsh with them, their ire is directed at him and not the entire force. They tie *rakhis* on their RPF friends during *Rakhsha Bandhan*.

Mukhtangan has even changed the mission statement of the RPF. It now undertakes to:

- Remain vigilant to prevent trafficking in women and children and take appropriate action to rehabilitate destitute children found in railway areas.
- Adopt all modern technology, best human rights practices, management techniques and special measures for protection of female and elderly passengers and children in pursuit of these objectives.

In fact, the informal networks of the railway children have helped the RPF in its policing activities.

"We have managed to rescue two little girls this June, thanks to the information we received from these children. We know this zone to be prone to human trafficking. Unfortunately, we have not managed to apprehend any traffickers so far. But given the way things are going, we are hopeful of achieving a breakthrough soon," says Sinha.

There are plans to provide vocational training to some of these youngsters with help from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur. At Asansol and Malda, the RPF has tied up with the Community Polytechnic Cell for vocational training.

The success of the Mukhtangan project is due to the thought that went into its planning. The children love to travel. They get on to trains, disappear for months on end and then reappear one fine morning with stories of what a wonderful time they had in Jammu or Shimla.

So an open ended, flexible schedule has been drawn up for them. Even the non-formal school's timetable is adjusted with the timings of 166 trains that pass through Kharagpur, every day.

Each child wants to earn some money on a daily basis. "I was working at a veterinary medicine factory in Mumbai," explains Firoz, "but they would not pay me every day. I would earn only Rs 1,200 at the end of each month. I could not stand it and I left in two months time."

The children are beginning to dream. Tahajur wants to save his money to set up a small cigarette shop at the station. Firoz has nearly given up his dendrite addiction. Little Subhas and his brother Vishwas, whose mother let them roam the station to pick up PET bottles for a living, now want to become plumbers or welders.

The Mukhtangan project welcomes volunteers. Interested readers can contact: mukhtangan@praajak.org.

For a day's work and a wage



Unemployed women workers wait for work squatting on a busy street in Ranchi, Jharkhand. They come from nearby villages. Only some will find work for the day from contractors at extremely low wages. Those who do get work, share their meagre earnings with other women in the group. Such unorganised labour markets are a common sight in many cities.

LAST year the campaign for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was forging ahead. Activists had decided to undertake a Rozgar Adhikar Yatra across India to inform villages and hamlets about the significance of NREGA.

A yatra needs documentation and what better way to capture those many images than to have a young photographer on board. That is how Sohrab Hura journeyed with NREGA activists to remote parts of the country as they tracked people looking for work and eking out survival.

Hura is from the Delhi School of Economics where Jean Dreze used to teach. Dreze is one of the architects of NREGA and was a moving force during the days of the campaign.

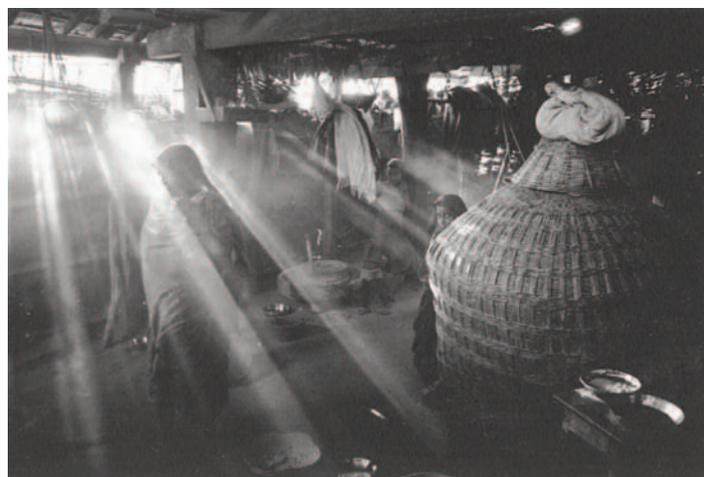
The yatra got Hura interest in the unemployment crisis gripping rural India. A fellowship from the National Foundation for India (NFI) in New Delhi helped him explore unemployment, a subject with deep social and economic implications for the rural family and the nation.

In many ways Hura's pictures are a stark exposure of the breakdown of agriculture. Even people with land, he found, are forced to migrate for work. Their parched fields have no water. There is no money to buy seeds, no knowledge of different agricultural practices. Those who don't migrate, like the Pahari Korwa tribe of Chhattisgarh, simply starve. Each child is malnourished. To get to them, Hura walked for hours.

Hura's camera captured children working on employment guarantee sites and elderly women walking barefoot to Dungarpur in Rajasthan to hear about the employment guarantee scheme. In Ranchi, he found women construction workers from villages waiting on a busy street, hopeful of a day's work.

Hura's black and white pictures convey the despair and anguish of rural joblessness.

An inside view of the sparse home of one of the richest families in the tribal village of Ubadgarhin in Pati block of Madhya Pradesh. Migration is the only option here. But with the NREGA in operation the family has decided not to leave their home, for the first time.



After working at the NREGA sites women workers in the Pati block of Madhya Pradesh wait anxiously to be paid wages for the first time in their lives.



In April, a Rozgar Adhikar Padayatra was carried out in Dungarpur district of Rajasthan to inform the people about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and their right to work. These women from the local area, who were all above 65 years of age, walked the whole distance covering almost 20 km a day. Some of them walked barefoot.



Children of the Pahari Korwa tribe in Chhattisgarh walk into a cornfield. Every child is malnourished. The Pahari Korwas are one of the most backward tribes in India. The employment rate among them is nil and even the closest medical clinic is a day's walk away. Their parched land yields only a single crop of corn. But the employment guarantee scheme has not been planned for this area.



In many cases, rural families are forced to send their children to work at the NREGA worksites out of desperation. One hundred days of work a year per household is not enough for families with many members. So while parents look for work elsewhere and even migrate, children labour at the employment guarantee worksites.



Two brothers toil hard for subsistence on their small piece of land at Bokaro in Jharkhand. The soil is infertile and there is no irrigation so hardly anything grows. Women queue up for hours to get a pitcher of drinking water.

A law for unorganised workers

Amit Sengupta
New Delhi

THE number of people working in the unorganised sector continues to grow rapidly, but there is no legislation to protect their interests. Their contribution to the economy goes unrecognised and they have no bank accounts, voter identity cards or even a ration card.

They are miners, factory workers, *bidi* workers, crafts persons, *dabbawallahs*, daily wagers, shift workers, domestic workers, garment workers, rickshaw pullers, bonded labourers, loaders, child workers, agricultural labourers, rag pickers, garbage collectors, artisans, sex workers.

Such disparate groups met in Delhi in August under the banner of the National Campaign Committee for Unorganised Sector Workers (NCCUSW) to discuss a comprehensive bill that would protect their rights and give them justice after 50 years of stark oppression, organised exploitation and indignity. The special focus of the workshop was the plight of women workers.

A separate bill is required for the unorganised sector because the nature of employment or work is different. Normal labour legislation cannot apply.

Several organisations, including trade unions, supported the idea of a bill and suggested amendments at the meeting. The workshop was sponsored by the National Commission for Women (NCW), and two of its members attended it. Malini Bhattacharya, CPM leader and member of the NCW, largely supported the proposed bill.

Said coordinator Subhash Bhatnagar, the life force behind the movement, "Americans are not going to vote for the government. These 370 million unorganised workers will vote. So why don't they give them their legitimate rights?"

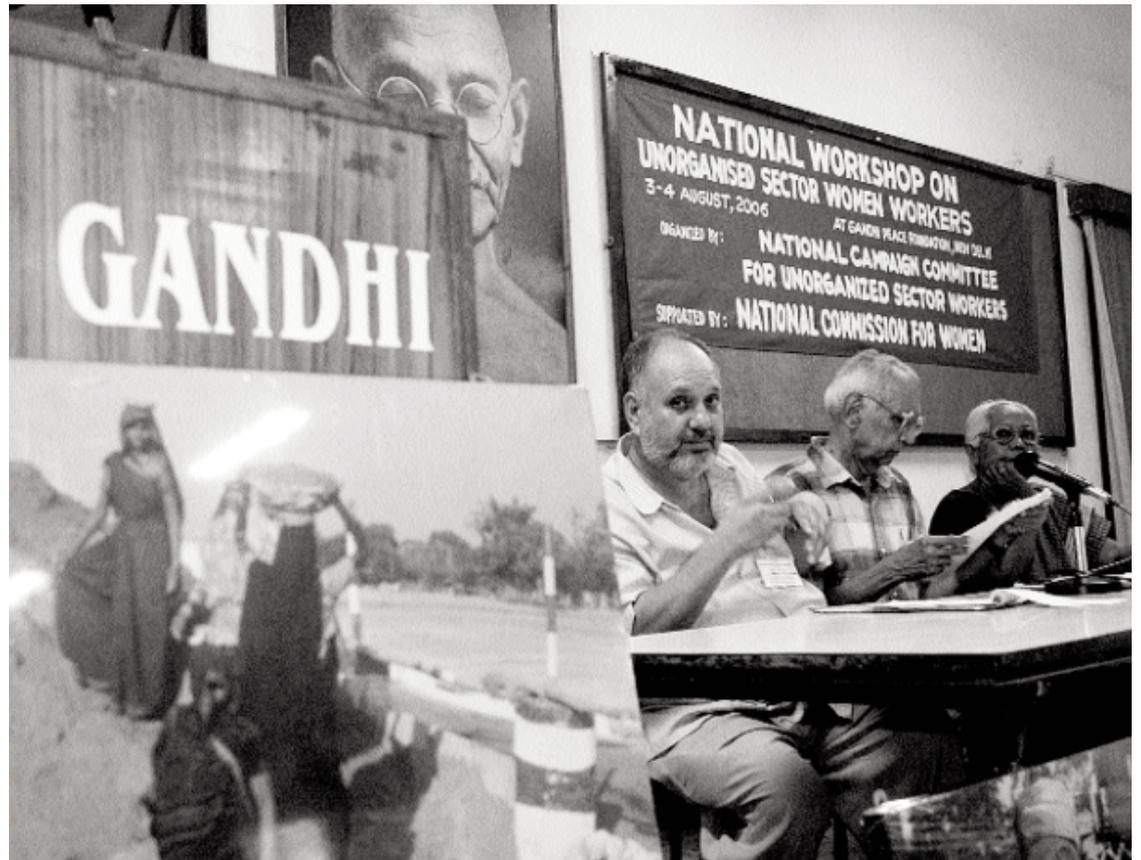
Says Geetha R, Regional Coordinator for South India, "Only seven percent workers are organised, while 93 percent workers are from the unorganised sector, of which 40 percent are women, so why should they be treated with such hostility and contempt?"

By conservative estimates, for instance, there are 14 million domestic workers in India. Thirty one percent of women are employed in rural areas while women in cities are 11 percent. People registered as unemployed with 936 employment exchanges are about 42 million (2004 figures). Fifty percent of unorganised workers are in the agricultural sector. India's working population is between 15-60 years of age but for these workers there is no upper limit.

Besides, in a booming economy, what has been the growth of job creation between 1994 to 2000? Less than 2 percent.

Veteran activist Jai Singh, who works for Dalit emancipation in feudal Punjab, points out that the majority of agricultural workers are Dalits in Punjab, that bonded labour is still prevalent, that Dalit women are eternally trapped in a debt-cycle and thus have to do '*begar*', that is, work without wages.

"They take a loan of Rs 2,000 and work for 10 years to repay it. For unorganised workers there are no salaries. Men are paid below the minimum wage rate that is not fixed, and women are paid less than men for the same amount of work. Two lakh people from Chhattisgarh work as bonded labourers in Jammu. Their women are sexually



The National Workshop on Unorganised Sector Women Workers discussed legislation for this sector

MINIMUM LABOUR STANDARDS, SECURITY, SAFETY ...

- **Right to livelihood including right over common property and resources.**
- **Minimum labour standards to achieve decent conditions of work.**
- **Right of workers to formulate and implement schemes through tripartite boards at various levels.**
- **Workers and employers in different sectors of the informal economy to be identified by registered trade unions and registered.**
- **Employment in certain sectors of the informal economy to be only for those workers who are registered under the law.**
- **Equitable sharing of the available employment.**
- **Employment guarantee for a minimum number of days in a month.**
- **Piece rates to be not less than wages for eight hours of work. Responsibility to ensure this will be with the autonomous body.**
- **Provision of safety measures, social security, pension, group insurance, relief for accident and natural death and a minimum guarantee of earnings.**
- **Provision of ESI, PF, gratuity, maternity entitlement, housing, crèches and prevention of sexual harassment of women.**
- **Restriction of mechanisation and labour displacement strategies and promotion of labour intensive methods.**
- **Inbuilt tripartite dispute resolution mechanism and appellate authority.**

exploited. They are treated like cattle, forcibly disconnected from home and sometimes trapped for years. There is no judicial or official process which protects them."

Agrees Shalini of SEWA, Gujarat, "Women workers are invisible, and totally scattered. Thousands of them are not even aware of their rights. Their children grow and die on the streets or at the work sites. They have no health facilities. They are homeless and migrant and the employers take no

responsibility."

Bidi workers in Gujarat buy their own thread and finally get Rs 2 for a certain number of *bidis*. Nothing is fixed, neither working conditions, nor work conditions, in these millions of sweatshops across the country, like in the woodcraft industry in Saharanpur, the glass and bangle industry in Ferozabad, the *zari* and embroidery industry in old Delhi.

It's the same for agricultural workers. Jai Singh says

that in Punjab if people demand minimum wages, the landlord tells them they will not be allowed to go for ablutions in the fields, as simple as that. "That is, you are forced to work on their land, for low and illegal wages, or you go jobless." Besides, with new technology and pressure from migrant workers from other states who are ready to work for low wages, agricultural labourers in Punjab are in dire straits.

"What about the migrant worker under the NREGA, or the single woman, or the widow, or the girl with no parents," asks Anuradha Talwar who works in the starvation hit areas of Purulia and Midnapur in West Bengal. "Tell me, what is the identity of the single woman?"

"In 30 years of this Left-ruled state, there is no health system, no health insurance. There are hospitals but no doctors or nurses. There is no implementation of laws. The labour department is like a monstrous and insensitive anti-labour machine, and even the minimum wage circulars are not floated," says Talwar. "For 22 blocks in Purulia there are 11 wage inspectors, and no deputy labour commissioner. There are starvation deaths in many tea gardens of Bengal, and there is forced labour, mass displacement and migration. There have been public testimonies by women whose husbands died of starvation but the government refuses to react."

"In the Dhanbad coal mines," said Vishwanath Baghi who works with coal miners in Dhanbad,



Subhash Bhatnagar

"for the government's Jharkhand coalfields, 40,000 unorganised workers who work in the underground mines, simply don't exist. Their names are not listed. They have no identity cards and no rights. Often they just wait for work and don't get it."

So, who will listen to the 370 million unorganised workers?

Subhash Bhatnagar is stunningly confident. "They have no option, the establishment. We will see to it that workers have voting rights, that they are registered, that they are given their fundamental constitutional rights. We will mobilise on the proposed bill which we want Parliament to enact."

"In the Indian Labour Conference attended by all the trade unions on December 10, 2005, the Labour

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Secretary of the Union government, KM Sahney, had proposed a tripartite committee," he explains.

"We also want a tripartite committee with representatives of the unorganised workers, employers and the government, with emphasis on more powers to the unorganised sector. In that sense it is one step forward. There is already consensus among most trade unions on our demands. Even the Centre for Trade Unions of the CPI (M) has made a separate proposed bill, but most of their demands are similar to ours. If the tripartite committee succeeds in evolving a consensus, then the bill will be a reality."

Though social security laws such as the ESI Act, EPF Act, Payment of Gratuity Act, etc. have been sought to be extended to the unorganised sector, constraints in application are being experienced. This is because there is lack of continuity of employment, the employer-employee relationship keeps changing and there are no records pertaining to details of employment.

If the benefits of labour legislation are to reach unorganised workers, it is necessary that the law take note of the unique features of the unorganised sector and provide not merely welfare, but regulation of employment.

This regulation cannot be left to employers or to the administrative hierarchy, but must be entrusted to an autonomous body consisting of representatives of the workers, government and the employers.

WE ALL BELIEVE IN OUR RIGHTS

But, do we actually realise them?

Till it is too late.

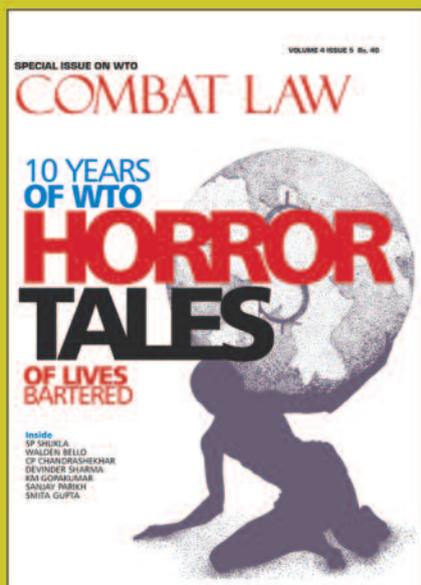
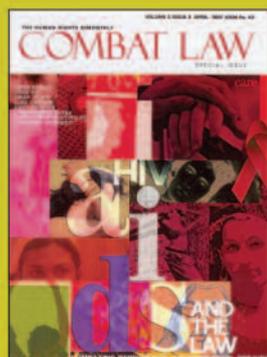
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Manipur women can end militancy

Civil Society News
New Delhi

It was hard to ignore a large gathering of women on the pavement outside Jantar Mantar, New Delhi's hotspot for protests. Armed with banners, slogans and a loudspeaker the group vociferously demanded 33 percent reservation for women in state legislative assemblies and Parliament.

The *dharna*, which carried on for 17 days, was organised by the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). The federation is demanding that the bill for 33 percent reservation to women be passed in Parliament without any more dillydallying.

The NFIW's *dharna* started on 24 July, the opening day of the monsoon session of Parliament and continued till 9 August, the historic Quit India movement day. Women from the length and breadth of India took part.

Among the sea of faces reflecting India's diversity was a contingent of 130 women from Manipur clad in traditional attire. They said they wanted political power to tackle militancy in the state and take development forward.

"Politically we are completely frustrated," said Rose Mangshi Haokip, a retired lecturer in political science from Imphal. "We are the biggest victims of militancy, caught between the army and the militants. Both violate us."

"Militancy begins within the family," she said. "Women can influence husbands and sons more than aggressive men. We can bring militants to the

table. But for that we need to be in a position of strength in the administration and the decision making process."

Sumati from Imphal plans to contest the next time state elections are held. "Out of 60 seats, 20 should go to us," she said. "There is corruption in the administration and the men are standing in our way."



Besides, reservation in the legislative assembly, argue the women, will encourage women in panchayats to further their political careers.

"The government is always told to take a tough stand on militancy. We urge the government to take a soft stand. Try us out," says Haokip.

The NFIW wants the women's reservation bill drafted by Geeta Mukherji, former vice-president of NFIW and a former member of Parliament to be tabled in Parliament and passed. They are not inter-

ested in waiting for the government to increase the overall number of seats first. The process of delimitation is gigantic and will take a lot of time and money, they say, and women have waited long enough.

"Our earlier perception was that women on their own capabilities would enter the elected bodies.

But the stark reality is that the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha has never touched even nine percent," says NFIW.

In 1996 the United Front government introduced the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill that was meant to give one-third seats to women in the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies but some political parties opposed it. The NDA government paid some lip service to the bill and then put it in the back burner.

The UPA government's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) has 33 percent reservation for women on its agenda. Therefore state units of the NFIW have been agitating for it.

Left parties have always backed women's reservation. On the last day of the *dharna* they were there in full strength. Other political leaders came too. NFIW has managed to get the support of political parties from the south.

Dr S Ramadoos of the PMK, Dayanidhi Maran of the DMK and a representative of Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam said they would wholeheartedly support the bill.

But then political parties come and go while the women's reservation bill goes on forever.

Tribal death sparks protest

Rakesh Agrawal
New Delhi

THERE is no one to implement the law in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Agricultural labourers toil over fields of paddy and wheat here for a pittance. They get a few kilos of rotten cereal as payment. The statutory minimum wage of Rs 60 is not paid.

On 31 July, an 18-year-old tribal, Ajay Agariya died after having no option but to consume filthy food in Banaura village, Sonabhadra district.

Agariya belonged to Kumbha Khurda, a neighbouring village. Forty three members of his village came to work in Banaura. People migrate to Madhya Pradesh as they remain unemployed for most of the year. Although Sonabhadra and Mirzapur are covered by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), there is no sign of it here.

About 40 labourers fell seriously ill. They were mostly between 10 and 25 years old and many were girls.

Ajay Agariya was working on the fields of Kallu Pradhan, a big landlord with eight hectares. Pradhan is a typical feudal landlord. Workers had to start as soon as the sun rose and leave long after night fell. After four hours of labour they would be given a fistful of gram porridge as breakfast. "Just

this and some water to make us work like animals," says 15-year-old Dhankumari Uravan.

For lunch they would get a frugal meal of degraded rice and kesari dal--banned as it induces physical disability. "When I objected to the quality of cereals that I had to cook the landlord scolded me and threatened to book my husband in a false case," says Roniyan Devi, 30.

"From the third day of work many of us fell ill. I suffered loose motions and also vomited," says 12-year-old Jitendra Agariya.

But instead of improving the food and providing medical attention the landlord forced them to carry on working. "We were scolded for wasting time as we had to relieve ourselves and he threatened to cut our wages to just a few kilos of paddy," says 18-year-old Mina Agariya.

On that fateful day, after eating the poisonous lunch, Ajay was horribly sick. He vomited many times. But Pradhan kicked and abused him and told him to work. He turned down Roniyan's request to send Ajay to a hospital and instead abused her too.

"Then we carried him across the Belan river and took him to the hospital on a tractor," says 25-year-old Laxman Uranvan. But Ajay Agariya died on the way.

The workers collected Rs 25 to pay for the tractor. Pradhan just paid Rs 135 as wages for five days

work to some workers. He is ready to give only Rs 1,000 for Agariya's funeral.

Roniya lodged an FIR in the Pannu Ganj police station. The police were reluctant. They have yet to take any action. Villages say the police have taken money from Pradhan and are whitewashing the incident.

To expose the misdeeds of landlords in Sonabhadra district and to get the police to arrest Pradhan, an inspection team of representatives from the Human Rights Legal Assistance Centre, National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers, New Trade Union Labour Initiative, National Convenor of Agriculture Labour, Rural Labour Union, UP Bhumi Sudhar Avam Shram Adhikar Abhiyam Samiti and Kaimoor Kshetra Mahila Kisan Sangharsha Samini (KKMKSS) went to Banaura on 9 August and carried out a thorough investigation.

"We have demanded that a crime of homicide be registered against Kallu Pradhan. A high-level inspection of the failure of NREGA must be done and the provisions of non-residential law regulating migration of labour from one state to another be enforced strictly. Family members of the deceased person must be immediately given relief and the accused must pay compensation," says Shanta Bhattacharya, president, KMKSS.



A people's bird sanctuary

Susheela Nair
Bangalore

FROM December to March the village of Kokkrellur in the Mandya district of Karnataka hums with activity. Countless painted storks and pelicans descend in droves to rear their young. They quickly colonise tall shady trees of tamarind, peepal and portia and get down to the business of making nests.

Kokkrellur is a sanctuary for birds, sheltered by the people.

The village is 80 km from Bangalore, on the road to Mysore. A 14-km detour from the National Highway takes you to this hamlet surrounded by fields of yellow green paddy and rust brown *ragi*.

You will see birds everywhere—atop trees, on the ground and perched on rooftops. Catch them circling low, then swirling and soaring higher in the sky.

The village protects its trees and water bodies so that birds can have their babies comfortably. It is one of five nesting spots in India for the endangered spot-billed pelican (*Pelicanus philipensis*).

"The pelicans are a globally threatened species numbering only 2,000. Ten per cent of the global population of this species are to be found in Kokkrellur," says Manu, an engineer and bird lover from Mysore.

In 1994 his voluntary environment group, the Mysore Amateur Naturalists (MAN), started Project Pelican to save Kokkrellur's pelicans from disappearing and their numbers are now looking up.

The birds started vanishing when Kokkrellur's habitat began deteriorating. With help from MAN the villagers are now conserving their environment for the birds. There is a centre for sick, malnourished and injured birds, too.

For the villagers, the pelicans and storks are a godsend. Trees are left undisturbed so that the avian wonders can nest. The fish diet of the birds provides abundant bird droppings, rich in potassium and phosphate that fertilises fields. The birds feed on fish in tanks and lakes around Kokkrellur.

The villagers do not worship the birds, but they believe that they are harbingers of fortune bringing

rain and good crops. They flaunt their long association with the birds and even refer to them as 'daughters of the village'. Villagers say the birds are like their local girls who marry into another village but return home to have babies. They relate innumerable tales about nabbing intruders who tried to rob the nests of breeding birds.

But over time the population of people increased and along with it, the demand for natural resources. People began cutting branches and leaves of trees for fodder causing little chicks to fall off their nests. Some would die of injuries or be eaten by prowling dogs and crows. Shy storks stayed away, afraid of strangers. Lakes and tanks

A conservation project started by the people has curbed the drastic decline in breeding numbers. A group of youngsters run a conservation pen for orphaned chicks and a Pakshi Paalana Kendra, under the guidance of MAN

around Kokkrellur began getting silted and polluted making it difficult for birds to find fish to feast on.

A conservation project started by the people has curbed the drastic decline in breeding numbers. MAN started a grassroots action group of youngsters from the village called '*Hejjarle Balaga*'. They run a conservation pen for orphaned chicks and a *Pakshi Paalana Kendra*, under the guidance of MAN.

The Kendra looks after birds who are sick, diseased and malnourished and those who suffered injuries because they fell off their nests or were

attacked by predators. These chicks are raised till they are four months old. They are then returned to the wild to join their naturally raised siblings, which they do so without any adaptation problems.

The state government pays an annual incentive to each family to maintain tamarind trees in their backyards. "The villagers are encouraged not to damage trees. Instead they preserve trees by not pruning their branches or harvesting ripe *imli* fruit as it would disturb nests and scare birds away. Around 300 families are presently involved in this scheme," says Manu.

Manu's efforts include improving the quality of life in the village. MAN organises nature camps and educational programmes for school children. They hold regular health clinics for villagers every Sunday. The group organises reforestation through seed collection and household tree nurseries.

Their efforts include protecting the quality of water in the village and increasing the fish population in irrigation tanks and lakes since these are important foraging areas for pelicans.

But Kokkrellur is now facing a new threat. It has attracted the attention of the government that has included it in plans to boost rural tourism. Approach roads have been improved. But many trees, home for the birds, were chopped to do that.

There are plans to construct a watchtower. If done indiscriminately this would hamper the easy movement and flight of birds. "It would be beneficial to put up telescopes on fixed tripods at specific locations," says Manu.

Attracting tourists comes with a host of problems. "If restaurant facilities are developed in Kokkrellur, weekend tourists will descend on the village and not only shoo away birds but also invite monkeys and birds of prey like eagles. These predators will attack the eggs and young ones. Kokkrellur which has been protected for centuries should be kept out of the regular tourist circuit," say some worried environmentalists.

"It is imperative to develop an information centre to educate and create awareness among people in general and tourists in particular about the history of the place and the birds. The local youth could be involved," says Manu.

Environmentalists recommend that a village forest committee be formed to manage Kokkrellur's fragile environment and cater to tourists. The State Forest and Tourism Departments should provide financial support to the forest committee. The Karnataka Forest Department, Mandya Zilla Panchayat, the department of minor irrigation and fisheries and the tourism department must work in harmony with the village forest committee to safeguard the nesting of birds.

The government should discourage mass tourism and promote Kokkrellur as a place for eco-tourism and the study of birds. A report by AF Ferguson & Co entitled, 'Development Perspective on Rural Tourism in India' says the basic concept of rural tourism is to benefit the local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment, conservation, the development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage. However, it simultaneously warns of the damage rural tourism can do, if it is not pursued in a responsible and sustainable manner.

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Project Jyoti



Tahseen Bano is a Chikankari worker in Kanpur who practiced this art the traditional way, drawing designs by hand before trying them out on fabric. Tahseen now sees a

new way to practice her craft with the use of computers. She makes intricate designs on her computer and is able to experiment with colours before doing it on fabric, saving herself time and money. With the help of the Internet, Tahseen has been able to sell her Chikan suits to Indians living abroad directly and without the involvement of middlemen.

Project Jyoti programme was launched in August 2004 by Microsoft. Its goal is to create and deliver sustainable technology (IT) solutions to individuals and communities in rural India and transform their lives by helping them realise their full potential.

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learn about

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With grants of Rs. 27 crores in cash and software (as of April, 2006) to 9 NGOs, Microsoft has extended the benefits of this project to Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, New Delhi, Pondicherry, Gujarat, Orissa, Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

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How the RTI Act was almost killed

WHAT'S HIDDEN IN GOVT FILES?

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

AMENDMENTS that would have curtailed the scope of the Right to Information Act were put on hold after they became a major political embarrassment for the Congress. Faced with a public outcry that went on

for weeks and seemed to involve all sections of society, Sonia Gandhi finally interceded and asked the government to drop the changes or to pursue them only after adequate consultations.

As the government backed off, RTI campaigners breathed a sigh of relief and even celebrated. But there was a new mood of caution and mistrust towards a government that came to power two years ago saying that it would listen to

Anna Hazare on fast in Maharashtra



activist groups to make its policies more meaningful.

The RTI Act was drafted after extensive consultations and finally shaped in the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Sonia Gandhi. The amendments by contrast were moved by stealth. No one knew of their existence till they were cleared by the Union Cabinet and ready to be placed before Parliament.

Similarly, the decision to put the amendments on hold came with utmost reluctance. It was only when the protests continued to spread and respected former bureaucrats like J. Lyngdoh, Madhav Godbole and EAS Sarma spoke out that the government realised its image was taking a beating.

A hunger-strike unto death by Anna Hazare was also cause for serious concern for the government. He has a huge following in Maharashtra and if anything happened to him, the Congress would be in a mess. Thousands turned up to pay their respect to Anna near Pune. Anna has fought many RTI battles in Maharashtra and in fact got the state to draft one of the best RTI laws. Experience has shown that Anna and his slogan, "People are the rulers," cannot be taken lightly.

There was also a political wake-up call from the CPI and the CPI(M). Brinda Karat attended demonstrations. The Left made it known that it would not support the amendment bill in Parliament. The BJP, initially ready to go along, also pulled out after its knuckles were cracked by Sudarshan of the RSS and it realised that support for the amendments would run contrary to middle class sentiments in cities like Delhi.

The amendments were drafted by bureaucrats claiming to strengthen the RTI Act, but in fact they took away the very provisions which made government accountable to citizens.

With an amazing sleight of hand, the bureaucracy sought to put the magical words "file notings" into the law through the amendments, but simultaneously so weakened the law that it could never be effectively used to unravel government decisions.

Access to file notings has been an issue because the RTI Act does not specifically mention them. The amendments sought to bring in file notings, but the trick was that they would only be substantial notings and that too with regard to "social and development works".

Since there was no definition of "social and development works" the actual application of the RTI Act would be left to the discretion of the government. The role of information commissioners was also made advisory. Also no information would be given on matters in process. Only final decisions would be known.

Such changes would virtually seal off government from citizens and made a mockery of the right to information. "Without access to file notings there can be no RTI," said Lyngdoh, the redoubtable former Chief Election Commissioner, on national television.

But why were bureaucrats so eager to push through these amendments? What is there in the government's files that they are so eager to hide?

It appears that as long as RTI was used to expose corruption at lower levels, it

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAKSHMAN ANAND



Euphoria's Palash Sen

Protests broke out across the country. People who had used RTI to get justice did not want to give up the power it gave them



Aruna Roy with activists in Delhi

did not matter. Top bureaucrats began to worry when they found that transfers and appointments could come under public scrutiny. This was a challenge to their supremacy.

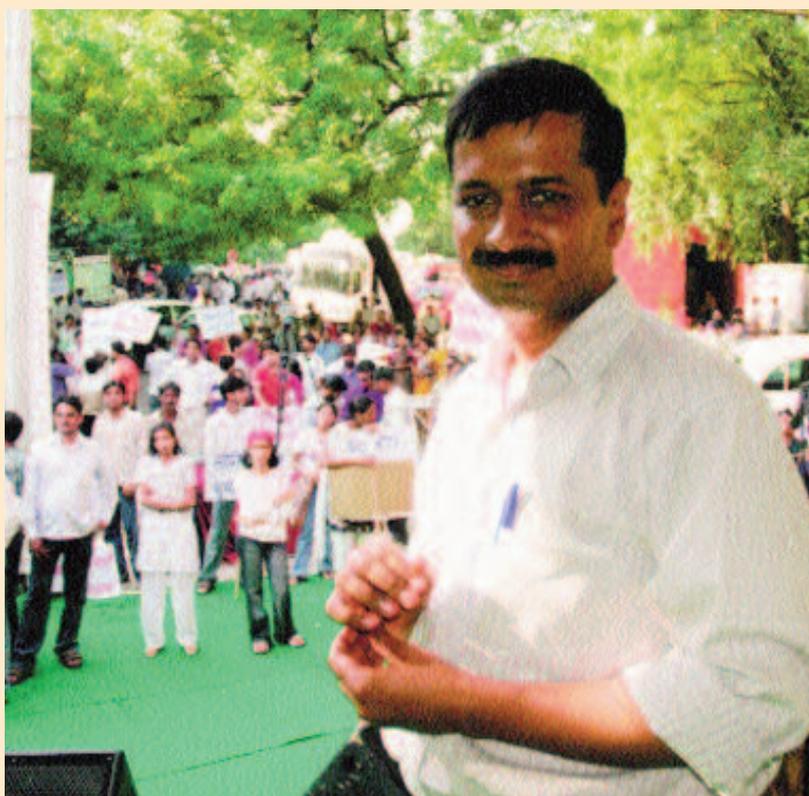
"It is the mindset of senior bureaucrats, even honest ones. They don't want to be subjected to intensive public scrutiny of their actions," says the Prashant Bhushan, the public spirited lawyer who has been championing RTI.

Particularly galling to the top bureaucracy would be the kind of petition moved by Arvind Kejriwal of Parivartan, this year's Magsaysay Award winner. He has sought information on the appointment of secretaries to the Union government.

Under the rules, secretaries have to be chosen from all cadres and have to have some proven competence for the departments they head. Kejriwal has asked for the files to see what thought had gone into the appointments.

For months he received no reply. He appealed to the Chief Information

'Many bureaucrats find it ea



Arvind Kejriwal

Arvind Kejriwal is a founder of Parivartan and winner of this year's Ramon Magsaysay award for his work on the right to information. *Civil Society* spoke to him on the amendments and the decision of the government to shelve them.

What is your response to the withdrawal of the amendments?

It's a great victory for the people and for the media. The media was an equal partner in this battle. Certainly the bureaucracy tried to scuttle the RTI Act but because a large number of protests took place the government was forced to withdraw the amendments.

Do you plan to continue your campaign?

The bureaucracy will strike back so we have to intensify our campaign. Earlier our campaign was issue-based but now we are making it more broad-based. Citizens should develop a stake in the right to information so that it becomes suicidal for the government to tamper with the RTI Act.

Do you believe that the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and the UPA leadership was misled by the bureaucracy?

I think the Prime Minister was seriously misled.

To what would you attribute the success of the campaign?

It's only because of Anna Hazare. His fast and his dedication made all the difference.

Why do you think the bureaucracy is against showing file notings?



Commissioner, who summoned the government, but it continued to resist. Finally the department of personnel agreed to give the files, but only after a month.

"I had waited six months. What was another month," says Kejriwal. But a week later the amendments to the law were drafted and moved. The files Kejriwal wanted on the appointment of secretaries had effectively been put out of reach.

So, was this the turning point that made bureaucrats want to kill RTI because it took transparency right to the top?

Shekhar Singh, an important campaigner who has long experience of dealing with government, agrees that it was when RTI was used to cut too close to the bone that the bureaucracy felt threatened and decided to act.

"It is not corruption alone. Bureaucrats get worried when their supremacy, their right to make transfers and so on is questioned," he says.

The Congress-led UPA came to power with the pledge that it would provide RTI. The RTI Act itself was shaped in the NAC, but it was based on the

experience of grassroots groups, who had worked long and hard on its provisions before the NAC took it up.

Once enacted, the Central RTI law reinforced laws in the states. With campaigners promoting RTI it has become a powerful tool for the ordinary citizen to make the government accountable.

RTI has been widely used to expose corruption. It has fired the imagination of citizens and empowered them like nothing before. The truth has begun coming out on how public money had been siphoned off. From ration shop supplies to road repairs, pensions, examination results and privatisation initiatives RTI has given people a sense of being in control.

In the light of these successes and the goodwill they had brought the UPA, the government did not seem to be able to explain the amendments. Sonia Gandhi herself maintained a stony silence. It took Aruna Roy of the MKSS several phone calls to get an appointment. When they did meet, Sonia Gandhi just listened and said nothing.

As the Congress and the government lapsed into silence, protests broke out across the country. People who had used RTI to get justice did not want to give up the power it gave them.

Demonstrations and a rock show by Euphoria were held by college students and other activists at Jantar Mantar. The posters said: "Manmohan Singh you should be ashamed of yourself" and "Sonia Gandhi break your silence".

Such protests were not by people in huge numbers, but they were unprecedented. It is not common for the middle class to come out on the streets. There were also resident welfare associations in Delhi, which had used RTI and did not want to lose the protection it gave them against corrupt local officials.

Sandeep Pandey, a Magsaysay award winner, went on hunger-strike at Jantar Mantar.

But the real clincher was Anna Hazare's fast. When all seemed lost, Kejriwal said to us:

"I'm pinning my hopes on Anna's fast. Anna's fast has always worked wonders."

There were others too who added to the pressure. Shabana Azmi came out in public against the amendments saying that the people's right to information could not be taken away from them so arbitrarily.

The Officers' Association of the Bhilai Steel Plant said it was in favour of a strong RTI law so that honest officers could act without fear.

The anger against the Manmohan Singh government was because of the peremptory manner in which it acted. Activists of the MKSS in Rajasthan and Parivartan in Delhi among others all over the country had struggled to implement state level laws to show that RTI improves the quality of governance.

Much of this work was done at the grassroots at personal risk. In Delhi, Santosh of Parivartan had her throat slit by resentful ration shop owners. In the early days

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sier if there is transparency'

RTI is a little amorphous. Different levels of people are comfortable with different levels of transparency. People want complete transparency but the bureaucrats and politicians are not happy with this level of transparency. They are comfortable only with certain levels of transparency.

Are there bureaucrats who supported the RTI campaign against the amendments?

A number of bureaucrats want this level of transparency. Every honest bureaucrat wants it. There are several who want it because it strengthens their hands. Some district magistrates in UP found it easier to say no to politicians because they could tell them that under the right to information people can ask for details of your transaction. A senior secretary level IAS officer from Punjab told us at a meeting that she was forced to make provisions for expenditure to a political party. She wrote on the file against it. If the file had come out in the open people would have supported her and she would not have been victimised, she told us.

Why do you think things went wrong for RTI campaigners in the first place?

I won't say anything went wrong. I would say it was expected. The RTI law that we got is actually so powerful it had started making a dent in the right places. It was threatening the corrupt in the bureaucracy and the corrupt among the

politicians. The danger became real and imminent and so they struck. It was an expected evolution in the right to information movement.

But activists were critical of the role of the Central Information Commission?

Yes, because they had no idea of judicial processes. The government then wanted to further curtail its powers under the proposed amendments. Actually the answer to that is to strengthen the commission.

Are you getting enough support from people?

People have been using the RTI but we have not built up as big a constituency as we would like to. The right to information is a movement. It does not have a central organised structure. We don't have an organised network as yet of all the people using RTI. But certainly we have reached a stage where there is a demand for RTI.

How do people express it? During the campaign against the amendments we got phone calls asking what should we do for the campaign? Different people agitated in different ways. Some through e-mail, some walked to Parliament with us etc.

Were you moving too fast?

We did not bring it to a flashpoint. Lots of people were using the RTI in their own manner.

“ It's only because of Anna Hazare. His fast and his dedication made all the difference in getting the amendments withdrawn ”

'We have to be vigilant'

*Shekhar Singh has been one of the key campaigners for the right to information for several years now. He played an important role in the central law that was passed by the Congress-led UPA government. He spoke to *Civil Society* on why amendments to weaken the law were finally withdrawn and how the bureaucracy misled the top Congress leadership.*

It is historic that the government has withdrawn its amendments in the face of an agitation.

The amendments have not been withdrawn. They have been sent back to the cabinet where they will be reconsidered. So they will probably change the amendments around. We have to see what they come up with. The battle has been won, but the war will continue. We will have to continue to be vigilant against attempts to weaken the law.

What do you think led the government to reconsider its amendments?

First of all the Left and the BJP said they would not support the amendment bill and the government clearly did not want to be embarrassed. There was also opposition from within the Congress, ministers who would privately say to us that they were not in favour of the amendments because of the loss of good will that would be involved. All the credit that had gone to the Congress for bringing in the law would be lost. People would only remember Congress for weakening the law.

It is believed that the government had the tacit support of the CPI(M) and the BJP. So what made them change?

I can't tell you about the BJP. But the Left leaders have told me that they were not taken into confidence and learnt about the amendments only from the newspapers like we did. They were not in favour of the amendments.

But for the cabinet to pass the amendments in the first place requires consensus at a high level in the Congress. Are you saying the top leadership was misled?

The amendments were drafted by the bureaucracy and the top leadership was given the impression that they were intended to strengthen the law by specifically mentioning file notings when the amendments were

actually designed to weaken the law.

Are you saying that even the Prime Minister was misled?

I am ready to believe it was so. You see it is the bureaucrats who frame things.

So, it was the top bureaucracy worried about its supremacy being challenged?

Sure. They find RTI acceptable as long as corruption among lower officials SDOs and superintending engineers is being exposed. What worries the bureaucracy is when authority at the top to make transfers and so on is affected.

It is absurd to think that money made through corruption in ration shops and municipal works goes all the way to a chief secretary or a home secretary. It does not. At that level what matters is the enormous power that these officers enjoy.

You gave the impression at one of your press conferences that the bureaucracy had acted conspiratorially, waiting for the states to repeal their laws and then bring in the amendments to the central law.

I'm told that the DOPT spoke to chief secretaries to bring pressure on their chief ministers and prepare the ground for the amendments.

Why do you think the agitation has worked?

It is because of the large numbers of people who have come out in support of RTI. We always realised the importance of reaching out to more people. This time we did it. Just last evening I was speaking to resident welfare associations on the amendments and how they weaken the law.

Similarly there have been students and professionals who have either used RTI themselves or come to realize how it empowers the citizen.

What is the learning from this episode?

The learning is that you can't be complacent. Getting a strong Central law enacted was a big victory. We thereafter got busy implementing the law, forgetting that the law itself may be changed and weakened. So it is necessary to be prepared for vested interests to hit back. Even if these amendments are withdrawn, we will have to see what they are replaced with. The bureaucracy will strike again.



Shekhar Singh

(Continued from page 19)

Parivartan activists would also have to contend with police harassment.

After the Central law came into force last year, several of the states repealed their laws in the belief that the Central law would do. Now if the Central law was diluted, RTI across the country would get diluted. The government and the Congress owed everyone an explanation.

As the heat built, Suresh Pachauri, minister of state for personnel, called Arvid Kejriwal and asked him to come over for a meeting.

Kejriwal said he would meet the minister but not alone. He went together with Aruna Roy and other senior activists.

Pachauri said the government only wanted to specify the use of file notings through the amendments. The activists said that they were happy with the law as it was. Notes in files were already being accessed on the basis of orders by the information commissioners. If the government was passing the amendments to please the RTI activists there was no need for them, the minister was told.

Pachauri said that he would speak to the Prime Minister and get back to them. The next thing heard from the government was the decision to put off the amendments. But the decision came through the newspapers and television channels.

In the absence of direct communications, an atmosphere of suspicion prevails. Shekhar Singh believes that the battle has been won but the war is not over. "They will strike again," he says, as though speaking of some malevolent force.

Aruna Roy calls it a "victory of the people", which also indicates a great divide and a sense of continuing conflict.

The government's attempt to push the amendments through without consultation is indication of how little the bureaucracy understands what people want and need. It shows bureaucrats have no estimate of popular sentiments.

"They thought they would slip the amendments through," says Prashant Bhushan. "They did not expect this public response."

He also sees the amendments as a blessing in disguise. "Greater public awareness has been created and the issue of file notings has been brought into focus."

The government has said that disclosing notings will deter good officers from expressing themselves. It has also said that RTI laws elsewhere in the world and at the state level do not include notings.

This is only partly correct. Access to notings are available though in varying degrees. The RTI Act in India however gives full access to all opinion and advice given at the time of taking government decisions. In this it is a model piece of legislation and can even be regarded as a showpiece of Indian reforms.

"There is nothing wrong," says Bhushan, "in encouraging officers to think carefully before they write. To write things which are in the public interest and which they can publicly defend."

Kejriwal says many honest officers have told him that RTI has come as a boon. They can now fend off politicians by telling them that all decisions will be open to public scrutiny.

Shekhar Singh says that the learning from the recent events is that campaigners cannot afford to be complacent. "We thought we had got a strong law passed and so plunged into getting it implemented. Little did we realise that the law itself could be changed."

He believes that the Prime Minister and the Congress leadership were misled into thinking that the amendments would actually deliver a better law. It was the bureaucracy that was pushing through the changes to protect its turf.

Bhushan does not agree. "Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was always against complete disclosure of the file notings. He is a former bureaucrat and has the mindset of a senior bureaucrat. It was only under pressure from the NAC that he agreed to a law that provided access to the files."

Business

BEYOND PROFIT

Rethink money with us. What should the entrepreneur of the future be like? How can you get rich and still serve society? Do causes need bottom lines?

ITC adds health to e-Chaupal

Civil Society News
New Delhi

If you live in an Indian village, it is almost certain that you won't be near a hospital. Chances are that if you fall sick you will have to spend a whole day getting to a town or a city so as to be able to show yourself to a doctor. Even after you travel that far, the likelihood of being able to consult a specialist is remote. Urban hospitals are daunting and there is always the problem of identifying the right practitioner.

But what if there could be a reliable general physician, pharmacy and pathology lab for 1,200 rural households and a satellite link that would make it possible to consult the best specialists in the country? What if hospital appointments and surgery dates could be booked well in advance so that there is no time wasted?

ITC, India's largest cigarette manufacturer with growing interests in agricultural commodities, paper and hotels among other things, has set out to build such valuable connections from its network of e-Chaupals.

The e-Chaupals were conceived as Internet-linked hubs to help ITC source agricultural commodities. They have helped ITC penetrate rural areas and build relationships with farmers.

The big thing that e-Chaupals provide is connectivity. Farmers use them to get on the Internet to figure out prices, work out delivery schedules and make purchases. A level above the e-Chaupal is the Chaupal Saagar, which serves as a kind of rural shopping mall.

Over time, the e-Chaupals have with use become a two-way channel for carrying goods and services in and out of rural India. They solve the last mile problems of various producers.

Now pilot projects by ITC in a few areas of Madhya Pradesh have shown that the e-Chaupals can be used to provide health facilities as well.

The e-Chaupal's success owes much to the efficiencies of information and communication technology. But together with this have grown human resources, physical infrastructure and managerial insights. It is on these that its health initiative will seek to ride.

The rural health idea has been nurtured by S Sivakumar, chief executive of the International Business Division. Sivakumar is a graduate of the Institute of Rural Management in Anand (IRMA). After graduation he worked with a cooperative and the past several years have been spent with ITC.

He says: "That education is the biggest aspiration in rural India as elsewhere, and health cost is the biggest cause of indebtedness for the poor, have inspired us to start these rural health pilots. All this was possible because ITC believes in creating shareholder value through serving society."

The health initiative is, however, no mere badge of social responsibility worn



S Sivakumar

ITC's pilots cover 2,500 rural patients. But the business possibilities are exponentially bigger and this could finally be ITC's formal foray into health

by India's largest cigarette manufacturer. It is a viable business in its own right, which indeed it must be if it is expected to succeed and serve people well. The pilots of the past year have reached out to some 2,500 rural patients. But that is just for starters. The business possibilities are exponentially bigger and this could finally be ITC's formal foray into the health sector.

The services are at three levels. While the e-Chaupal is used for connectivity and creating awareness on issues of health, the Chaupal Saagar is where the clinic, GP and pathology laboratory are located. At the third level, the patient gets to consult specialists through telecom links.

Patients visiting the clinics in the past year have been paying Rs 25 for a week of consultations. But this is for primary care. Finally the viability of services, particularly tertiary level care, will depend on insurance.

Asked how market mechanisms have been put in place, Sivakumar says: "We are able to deliver quality health services in the rural areas at affordable cost by

(Continued on page 23)

Is Mission 2007 going too slow?

Vidya Viswanathan
Chennai

MISSION 2007 continues to grapple with problems of direction and policy in spreading Internet connectivity across rural India. The targets are ambitious. March 2006 was the deadline for setting up 10,000 Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs). And by 15 August, 2007, the number is to reach 100,000.

No one knows for sure how far Mission 2007 has got, but it is pretty certain that these targets haven't been met. Various players are at work. The government has got into the act and some companies are also taking the Mission ahead on their own steam.

Mission 2007 aspires to bring to rural India broadband internet connectivity and a host of services like education, healthcare, information for livelihoods, livelihood opportunities and business processes off-shored from urban India to rural India.

The goal is to accelerate facilities available in cities to villages. The Mission also wants to train 1.2 million people, two in each village, on using ICTs and creating local content by 2007.

The second annual general meeting (AGM) of the National Alliance for Mission 2007 took place in Chennai in the last week of July.

The objectives of Mission 2007 were outlined by Professor MS Swaminathan in 2003. But the alliance gathered momentum in 2005 after a high-powered policy workshop in 2004. The government also realised that VKCs would be critical to implement e-governance that was part of administrative reforms promised in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP).

VKCs were also seen as important for implementing and governing large national programmes like the Right to Information, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the National Rural Health Mission.

The finance minister mentioned the Mission in his budget speech for the year 2005-2006 and granted Rs 100 crores for the first phase through NABARD's rural infrastructure development fund. At the last AGM, he said that the Rs 6,000 crores that the Mission wanted would not be a problem but first 10,000 VKCs would have to be set up by March 2006.

The alliance is driven by Professor MS Swaminathan and his vision. In addition to government departments, TRAI, the Planning Commission and financial institutions, the alliance has attracted several individuals interested in grassroots initiatives, technologists and academics. It has also attracted several large private sector technology companies like Microsoft, Intel, HCL and TCS who see opportunities for growing the market.

Microsoft's CEO, Steve Ballmer has stated that future growth will come from the next billion customers. Microsoft is a member of the steering committee of the alliance. It is funding MSSRF (MS Swaminathan Research Foundation), the Nasscom Foundation, SEWA, Prayas, ICRISAT, Development Alternatives, Grameen Sanchar Society (Grasso), Indian Society of Agribusiness Professionals, Drishtee Foundation and World Vision for capacity building using ICTs.

Several for-profit social enterprise models already exist. There are Drishtee and n-Logue, government service models like e-Seva and Bhoomi and corporate models like ITC's e-Chaupal. But the alliance was to be led by civil society groups and created several community-owned centres that would have eventually provided enough services to become sustainable. These were to have been run by women, if possible, and housed on common property like the panchayat building or a school.

"This is possible. We all know that this can be done by people at the grassroots. The only way to do it is like how smallpox and polio vaccinations were done. Somebody has to go to each village and train and help local people set it

up. You have to train the trainers who will train the trainers and so on," says Arun Mehta, an alliance partner and a computer science professor interested in technology that empowers the grassroots.

So this year's gathering should have detailed what had been achieved last year and the plan for scaling up the project this year. Surprisingly, there was no mention of the March 2006 target or any course correction. While the Mission managed to raise interest and even support from international donor groups, it failed to translate it into an administrative machine.

The administrative set up for Mission 2007 had been discussed in a 2004 policy workshop. The first step was to hire an executive director. The alliance was to have state and district representation. The district machinery, set up for the

Mission, would identify grassroots partners or local communities who would in turn appoint a person to run the knowledge centre.

The content, services and connectivity would have to be locally relevant. MSSRF which is the secretariat for Mission 2007, is in the process of compiling a list of villages that have a knowledge centre. The Nasscom Foundation, which is an executive board member of Mission 2007, is also in the process of compiling its own grassroots partners who run VKCs.

Mission 2007 had also set up several task forces to address the 5Cs--

Connectivity, Care and Management, Coordination, Content and Capacity Building. The Connectivity Committee had made several policy recommendations last year and most of them have not yet gone through. The Content Committee, headed by Prof. V Balaji from ICRISAT, has not met after last year.

In the past year, Mission 2007 has spawned several other initiatives. NABARD, the Department of Information Technology (DIT) and Microsoft, all partners of the national alliance, have each announced their own models.

"The idea is for everyone to be complementary and not compete," says Ankhi Das, Lead, Corporate and Legal affairs, Microsoft, who is the company's interface with Mission 2007. Microsoft Research, which had done an independent study of kiosks run by Drishtee and n-Logue in 2005, found that most kiosk franchisees are not profitable. So it is putting together an initiative called Saksham which will work on the franchisee model with several partners like Jai Kisan, Drishtee and the Grameen Sanchar Society to create 50,000 kiosks in three years.

Microsoft is creating a content portal with several applications and striking strategic partnerships. For instance, it is working with SBI to pilot microfinance applications in Karnataka. It hopes to tie up with telecom companies to ensure that there is connectivity for kiosks. Microsoft's strategies are so thorough that it has listed even renewable energy for Saksham to make sure that power is available in rural areas. It also has plans to train 1.8 million people in basic computer literacy by 2010.

DIT is another big player. It has realised that kiosks will be the delivery point for the e-governance applications that are part of the NeGP (National e-Governance Plan). DIT has announced a framework for the Common Service Centres (CSC) that will be run by village level entrepreneurs (VLEs).

The government intends to fix a lot of gaps in the existing models. DIT noticed that several individual franchisees of companies suffer if they do not generate enough revenue. So DIT will have a Service Centre Agency (SCA) which will appoint village level entrepreneurs. Each SCA will need to have financial muscle and bid for a district. The government will guarantee some revenue through e-Government services and if that does not happen it will provide support up to 33 percent.

According to Ashish Sanyal, Director e-Governance at DIT, there were 1500 expressions of interest (EOIs) in the scheme across the country.

DIT's programme will be implemented by IL&FS (Infrastructure Leasing and



Mani Shankar Aiyer, MS Swaminathan and Narendra Modi

ITC adds health to e-Chaupal

(Continued from page 21)

(a) riding on the existing Chaupal Saagar infrastructure at marginal costs; (b) leveraging Internet and video conferencing technologies; (c) introducing health insurance; (d) partnering with a specialist health care provider.

Based on the experience with the pilots, Sivakumar is preparing to ask the ITC board for more funds for an even bigger push. An agreement has also been signed with Apollo Hospitals for tertiary level care.

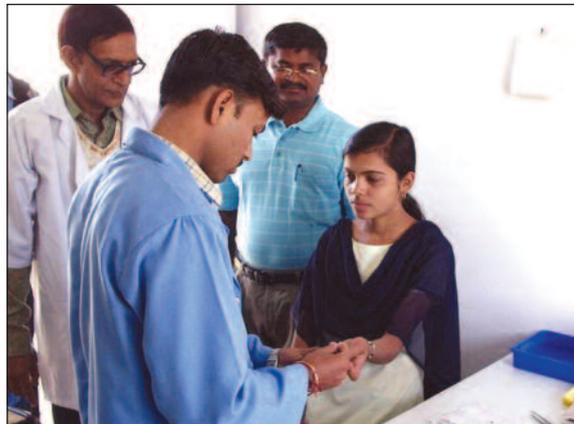
The story is in the numbers. On an average, an e-Chaupal covers 6,000 people or 1,200 households. The average spend per household on health care is Rs 4,400 a year. This means the total average spend on health care per e-Chaupal is Rs 53 lakhs. The number of e-Chaupals in MP is 1,700. The market potential in one state is therefore Rs 910 crores.

ITC has e-Chaupals in eight states. This means the total market potential for health services through e-Chaupals is Rs. 7,200 crores.

Asked how he proposes to scale up, Sivakumar says: "As the Chaupal Saagars roll out in different locations, health services will be integrated there. Already 10 Chaupal Saagars are operational in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. More are under construction. By March 2007, our plan is to take the number up to 50. These will cover more than 10,000 villages."

Of the 2,500 patients served, ITC says 50 percent qualify as being marginalised and of low income. The e-Chaupal initiative also seeks to supplement government initiatives on polio and malaria. Awareness is created through radio broadcasts and health queries are answered on the e-Chaupal website. This creates a culture of using information technology to know more. In health terms it leads to people looking for second opinions.

ITC already uses Sanchalaks to reach out into the community for its agricultural businesses. The same Sanchalaks encourage paramedics to seek training and accreditation. The Sanchalaks also interact with Health Champions chosen by villages. The Sanchalak earns on the basis of the number of people contacted, which serves as an incentive to include all sections of society.



"We have a weekly health talk delivered by the doctor through the Chaupal radio, besides uploading content related to health and well being on the e-Chaupal website"

Sivakumar says the primary emphasis is on wellness. "We have a weekly health talk delivered by the doctor through the Chaupal radio, besides uploading content related to health and well being on the e-Chaupal website. Health related Q&As on the website is quite a popular service. We also organise periodic camps in the villages, which many times combine with government interventions like pulse polio etc. Some of the topics we covered are immunisation, precautions to be taken during monsoon, protection from malaria, early detection of cancer etc."

Rural health care in India is largely symbolised by deserted primary centres set up by the government. In small towns, clinics and nursing homes with dubious reputations flourish. Village folk largely go to traditional practitioners who are themselves losing their skills for want of resources and official encouragement. If the e-Chaupal can provide access with accountability on a big enough scale, perhaps some things will change.

Mission 2007

(Continued from page 22)

Financial Services). Alok Bhargava, who heads the education initiative of IL&FS, will be in charge of the programme.

Aruna Sundarrajan, an IAS officer, has been appointed CEO of the CSC programme at IL&FS. She was earlier the IT secretary of the Kerala government and implemented the Akshaya programme of rural kiosks.

Dinesh Tyagi, an IAS officer of the Tripura cadre, is interfacing with each state for the programme. "There will be a Special Purpose Vehicle created to implement the programme and it will have stakeholders from all the SCAs, the government and financial institutions," says Sundarrajan.

The CSC framework is awaiting Cabinet approval though it was made public in 2005 and was intended to take the number of kiosks to 100,000 by 2007. But according to Bhargava, this is a decentralised implementation programme and several states like Jharkhand have already started identifying SCAs. It is up to the state to decide on the strategy to choose an SCA. Several alliance partners of Mission 2007 now see their role as one of helping the CSC programme. But even key members are unclear about several issues.

Rufina Fernandes, CEO of the Nasscom Foundation, asked what the role of community-based organisations would be in the CSC programme. Would they get to deliver e-governance services? The answer was not very satisfactory. Sanyal explained that an SCA would encourage a grassroots organisation to become a VLE if he was smart. Fernandes has encouraged some of Nasscom Foundation's grassroots partners to bid for being SCAs, assuring them financial backing.

One World South Asia (OWSA) lobbied with the DIT on the CSC framework to make sure that financial considerations are brought down to make it friend-

ly to smaller organisations. OWSA has been helping the CSC to bring together grassroots players and NGOs in states like Rajasthan and Uttaranchal. To the government's credit, it is listening to all players and the framework allows for SCAs to be training institutes, NGOs, cooperatives, companies and educational institutions.

Several issues need to be ironed out in the CSC programme. Sundarrajan says: "We cannot have chit funds and online lotteries to make these profitable. We are trying to see if the Kissan credit cards can be routed through these centres."

Connectivity is another issue that is stuck because of policy and takers for bandwidth in rural India. Parag Kar, director, government affairs at Qualcomm, whose company's CDMA technology is competing with the Intel pushed WiMax technologies in rural data connectivity, thinks that government should provide incentives for creating broadband data bandwidth that supports video in rural areas. "They should talk about info density and not teledensity. That will allow for a variety of services," he says.

Byraju Foundation, funded by Satyam Computers, believes that there will be demand for bandwidth if applications are created. The foundation has adopted 152 villages in the East Godavari district and wired 32 with 2 mbps connectivity. This has enabled them to hold live distance learning classes for English from a central studio. It has also helped offshore business processes from Satyam's office in Hyderabad to village centres.

"The mission is a movement not a project," says Shipra Sharma, project manager, OWSA. Professor Ashok Jhujhunwala, a pioneer in providing rural IT services, wound up the final session at the meeting by saying, "I don't see the answers yet but I'm not going to give up." His gut feeling is that it would take some more time to know how to use ICTs for rural development in a sustainable way.

"Don't expect any magic in a short time. This is one of the largest retail distribution networks being set up in the world, catering to 700 million people. It has never been done before," said Sundarrajan.

Worldview

LATITUDE MATTERS

Everyone owns a shrinking planet. People count more than governments. Track change before it becomes news.

Rural women buy phone not cow

Grameen Telecom reaches nearly every village of Bangladesh



Khalid Shams, managing director of Grameen Telecom.

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

IN 1974 Professor Mohammed Yunus was teaching economics in Bangladesh's Chittagong University. But he felt that the neo-classical economics being taught had little relevance to developing countries. Yunus believed every person, however poor, had an entrepreneurial streak. So he put his money where his conviction lay and started Grameen Bank in Jobra village close to the university campus.

The rest is history. Today, Grameen Bank is the largest financial institution investing in rural Bangladesh. It impacts the lives of six million households, disbursing half a billion dollars of loans every year.

The bank's Grameen Telecom, a not-for-profit set up in 1995 to promote ICT specially telecommunications in rural Bangladesh, owns 38 percent stake in Grameen Phone, the largest mobile phone operator in Bangladesh.

Grameen Telecom sells handsets and provides technical services to Grameen

Bank borrowers who become Grameen Phone subscribers. Grameen Telecom's Village Phone Programme now covers almost all of rural Bangladesh.

Poorer women buy these village phones with loans from Grameen Bank. The women then rent the phones to other villagers who need to make telephone calls and thereby earn an income. This has created a virtual telecom revolution in Bangladesh. The profit generated from village phones is being used to create a clutch of rural industries.

Grameen Telecom is headed by Khalid Shams who was a deputy of Yunus for nearly 20 years. He also served as the deputy managing director of Grameen Bank. *Civil Society* spoke to Shams who is now managing director of Grameen Telecom.

How did the idea of Grameen Telecom come up?

In 1994-95, the telecom sector was being de-regulated and foreign companies showed interest. Bangladesh had one of the lowest tele-densities in the world. The government could not increase its telecommunications services. There was one CDMA operator, who was a big business man, had a monopoly license but was not interested in expanding. We wanted to invest in telecom so that the clientele of Grameen Bank could get access to services. Iqbal Quadir, a young Bangladeshi venture financier based in the US, assisted us in locating potential investors from abroad.

We spoke to Telia, the Swedish telecom company. It was not interested because it wanted to go to India which was a bigger market. Telenor of Norway was keen to bid. Professor Yunus wanted Grameen Telecom to be a not-for-profit company which would hold shares in a telecom joint venture and provide services to the rural poor. Telenor was initially reluctant. But they clearly saw the opportunity of doing business in Bangladesh with Grameen which is a well-known brand name.

How was the rural component built?

Grameen Telecom's rural component, the Village Phone Programme, was built into the bid. In the 1995 bid offer, we said there would be 250,000 mobile connections in Bangladesh by 2002 and out of that 50,000 would be rural, going to Grameen bank borrowers. Grameen Telecom initially had 45.5 percent equity in Grameen Phone. Iqbal Quadir had 4.5 percent. Telenor had 51 percent plus the responsibility of managing Grameen Phone. Grameen Telecom decided to offer 9.5 percent of its shares to Marubeni.

Grameen Phone started operations from March 26, 1997. Today it is one of three GSM operators with 62 percent market share and 8.5 million subscribers. Out of that 240,000 are Grameen Bank borrowers. There are 80,000 Grameen bank centres all over Bangladesh. Every centre has at least one phone. Some have four or five. Nearly half the rural people now have access to modern cell phones.

A quiet revolution has taken place. The network has spread very quickly. Even remote islands in the Bay of Bengal, where people had never seen a phone in their lives, are connected.

You were able to spread quickly because Grameen Phone bid for right of way along the railway tracks...

In the early 1990s Bangladesh railways had laid a fibre optic cable to connect 330 railway stations for their internal communications. A lot of its capacity was not being used. The railways asked for international bids to lease out its fibre network and Grameen Phone decided to bid. Being the highest bidder, it was selected. From 1998, using this network, Grameen Phone was able to expand very rapidly.

Did the handsets have a special Bengali interface?

No. There were hilarious debates with Siemens, Nokia and Ericsson. They would say that a cell phone is like a computer and how will illiterate village people access it. We said as long as there is money to be made people will learn. Now of course Grameen Telecom is the largest agent of Nokia in Bangladesh and there is an interface for Bengali SMS.

We heard later that Telenor's board was against the idea. Tormod Hermansen, who was then CEO, came and saw Grameen Bank. He realised the enormous opportunities for mobile telephony in Bangladesh and bulldozed the board. This happened because he took the risk of venturing into an unknown territory.

Were you involved in technology decisions? Did you have to install special billing software at Grameen Bank branches?

No, we told Telenor to use whatever was best. We piggybacked on them. They just wanted us to tell them where Grameen Bank branches were concentrated.

Grameen Telecom buys telephone time in bulk from Grameen Phone and guarantees payments every month on the dot. Now each Grameen Bank centre has 40 members. If they have taken two loans each, there are 80 entries for repayment every week since loan installments are repaid on a weekly basis. The telephone bill is simply the 81st entry in the collection sheet of the local Grameen Bank manager. So the marginal cost of collection for us is zero. We can manage the rural telecom business better and more cost effectively because of Grameen's microfinance infrastructure.

How profitable are the village phones for the women who take loans to buy it?

Instead of taking a loan to buy a cow, a woman now takes a loan to buy a phone and a subscription. The ARPU (average revenue per unit) is the highest for a village phone as against other Grameen Phone users. On an average, the Village Phone operator's monthly airtime bill is 4000 taka a month. Fifty percent of that is often the net profit because she can charge whatever the market can bear.

It used to cost 15,000 taka for a phone plus subscription. That has now come down to about 7,000 taka. So it is a huge return. Woman who took phones on loan have now invested in land. They send their children to school. They have repaired their houses. Many have bought sewing machines or started a grocery store or a teashop.

How are these phones repaired?

Grameen Telecom has 22 service centres spread across the country. We give each phone a year's guarantee. We have taken kids from polytechnics and taught them repair and servicing. We repair the phones straight away or replace the sets under Nokia's one year warranty.

How are the phones charged where there is no power?

About 30 percent of Bangladesh is covered by electricity. Most of these phones are in public places like markets or bazaars where there is power or a generator. We have also started Grameen Shakti, another not-for-profit enterprise where we sell solar power systems through credit. These are slightly expensive and are affordable to people with a little higher income. But only a small percentage of people are using these now.

Professor Yunus had mentioned in an interview that at some point you would like Grameen companies to go public and that the wealth created would accumulate to the borrowers...

That is our dream. But the capital market is still very weak in Bangladesh. Grameen Bank launched the Grameen Mutual Fund and it was oversubscribed.

Our markets are down. Telenor is also not interested in an IPO because Grameen Phone does not need funds for expansion. But Grameen Telecom now owns 38 percent of Grameen Phone. We use our share of profits to create new rural businesses that will enhance the wealth of villagers.

We have got into the hospital business with technical support from the Aravind Eye Hospital. We are setting up two eye hospitals and Grameen Telecom is investing in the initial seed capital. Grameen Telecom is also investing in a Grameen Dairy project, which is a joint venture with Danone of France. Grameen Telecom will

have 12.5 percent stake.

Grameen-Danone will set up small rural dairies to tackle malnutrition among children in rural Bangladesh. We will add nutrients to yogurt and distribute it to rural areas. Grameen Bank borrowers will be the retailers. These dairy products will not come into cities. So the idea in countries like ours should be to encourage entrepreneurship that is socially minded.

How do you manage to stay out of politics even though you are now such a large entity?

The government owns a small five percent stake in Grameen Bank and hence has the right to nominate the chairman of its board of directors. Grameen borrowers own almost 95 percent of the bank's equity. Nine Grameen Bank members are elected once every three years to the board of the bank with very little commotion. Some of these women have now started contesting elections to the local union parishads that are similar to India's panchayats.

“ There are 80,000 Grameen Bank centres all over Bangladesh. Every centre has at least one phone. Some have four or five. Nearly half the rural people now have access to modern cell phones. A quiet revolution has taken place ”

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Hated Taliban ministry stages comeback

Wahidullah Amani
Kabul

HUMAN rights groups and ordinary Afghans are alarmed by plans for the revival of the Taliban-era's Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

President Hamed Karzai's cabinet has approved a proposal by the Afghan Religious Scholars' Council (Ulema) to resurrect the notorious ministry set up under the Taliban which ruthlessly implemented a string of arbitrary laws, particularly against women and girls, that were enforced by public beatings and imprisonment.

Women were targeted for, among other things, wearing socks that were not sufficiently opaque; showing their wrists, hands, or ankles; and not being accompanied by a close male relative. Men were beaten for trimming their beards.

It is unclear what the revamped vice and virtue department's powers will be and just what it will do, though the government insists it will differ significantly from the old one and promises it won't interfere in citizens' personal lives.

What constitutes vice is also unclear with media reports suggesting it will focus on alcohol, drugs, crime and corruption.

Deputy Minister for Haj and Religious Affairs Sulaiman Hamed said that the department would not have its own special police force and would confine its activities to preaching and encouraging citizens down the "right path". Only if this more subtle approach doesn't work would law enforcement authorities be called in.

"It will work in conjunction with the police and other judiciary organs," he said, adding both clerics and lay people would be involved.

"This department will not search for the hidden faults of the people like the Taliban did and it will not interfere in people's personal life. Searching for people's hidden faults is itself against Koran and Islam."

Hamed believes that having such a department is Afghanistan's duty as an Islamic society.

Human rights activists, however, aren't convinced that it is either necessary or going to be any different than its Taliban predecessor.

Nasrin Abubaker Gross, a lecturer at Kabul University and a women's rights activist, worries it will mean a return to the days when Afghan women were beaten by the police for infringing Taliban rules.

"I am confident that this department will once again create horror and fear among the people," she said. "I myself do not feel a need for establishment of such

a department. A lot of money will be spent on it. This money should be given to the people who commit immoral acts because of economic problems."

A member of the Afghan parliament who asked to remain anonymous believes a vice and virtue department would allow the Taliban to regain some of its lost political influence. "The way will be paved for Taliban in every village to carry out their political activities through this department," he said.

"Creating such a department allows those extremist fundamentalists who are against democracy to continue their hostility to democracy through this department."

Maulawi Habibullah Hassam, a religious scholar who heads Kabul's provincial council, has a different point of view.

He sees Afghan society as increasingly vice-ridden and in need of the strong moral leadership that would be offered by the department. Administrative corruption, raunchy movies and the consumption and selling of alcohol are just a few of the issues he believes needs urgently addressing.

Some like Nasrin Abubaker Gross worry what the rest of the world will think about Afghanistan's controversial ministry. However, complaints from the international community and human rights groups carry little weight with Hassam.

"We see hundreds of cases in the West such as same sex marriages, which are against the Islamic religion, democracy and even against human rights law yet they have not said 'why are they doing this'. So why are they interfering in our religious issues?" he protested.

Hamed also appears unconcerned about world opinion. "If the nation demands a department to prevent vice and promote virtue, the international community should accept it," he said.

However, ordinary Afghans who suffered under the Taliban are siding with the human rights groups in condemning their government's decision.

Some like Kabul resident Mumtaz, 22, have terrible memories of the department in its previous incarnation. He was working as a tailor's apprentice when a group of Taliban religious police came into the shop and arrested him, because his beard was too short. His head was shaved and he was jailed for seven days.

Noor Alam, 42, from Kabul was beaten and jailed by Taliban religious police for two months, also because his beard was not long enough. He's shocked that a similar style organisation is being resurrected.

"I hate one thing a lot in my life which is the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice. It is the virtue department whose police beat me until I became mentally ill," he said.

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Nepal's northwest faces food crisis

Marty Logan
Kathmandu

HERE on the narrow trails carved into the steep, emerald hills that plunge into the winding Karnali River hundreds of metres below, villagers have one thing on their minds: emergency rice.

Ninety percent of locals met by a group of visitors is either walking briskly to the airfield in Kolti to collect the 40 kg bags of rice or trudging home with the white sacks strapped to their backs. They move in small groups: men wearing narrow trousers, long-sleeved shirts and vests and patterned Nepali topis on their heads, women with bright handkerchiefs tied in their hair and circular rings in their noses all sporting cheap canvas running shoes or plastic sandals.

Richard Ragan wishes he could drum up such interest in the rice in Kathmandu. Country director of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in Nepal, Ragan has been soliciting donations to finance an emergency operation (EMOP) in 10 districts in the country's northwest for months -- but has raised only 17 percent of his 5.4 million dollar budget.

"We've certainly been vocal about the crisis, but this area has food shortages regularly so we have to work harder to overcome scepticism that this year is different," said Ragan. Birjit Katal has no doubts. "I've never seen drought like this in 50 years," says the porter sitting on a rock to smoke his hookah at the foot of the Pilichaur suspension bridge a few hours walk from Kolti, where the narrow, swollen Karnali laps at its banks like an ocean.

Asked what they need most right now, besides the rice, Katal and his porter colleagues respond immediately: irrigation and seeds.

In development terms, Bajura and surrounding districts are "food deficit areas": places where locals do not grow enough crops in the best of times to feed themselves. To make ends meet they work for daily wages, borrow from wealthy villagers or migrate to neighbouring India to toil as manual labourers for five or six months.

The WFP has long provided rice to villagers here in exchange for work such as road-building or if they send their children to school regularly. This year, for the first time, the agency decided that after the driest winter on record had withered most of the wheat crop, the "food gap" between harvests had grown so dangerously wide that it would provide locals with emergency rations.

WFP identified 70 needy village development committees (VDCs) in the 10 districts, where households would receive 80 kg of rice -- half before starting a "food for work" project and half when finished -- and 7 kg of fortified flour. Then it began looking for cash to buy and transport the grain. With no early pledges, it borrowed 543 metric tonnes of rice from the Nepal Food Corporation and 500,000 dollars from an internal account.

Now it cannot even pay back those loans, let alone begin phases two and three of the EMOP: shipping food to six districts even more remote than Bajura.

Only the United States and Australia have pledged to EMOP, and Ragan is warning that without more money he will have to prematurely end the operation without having helped the districts where the need is arguably the greatest.

Not that there is excess here in Bajura, the second poorest of Nepal's 75 districts according to CARE-USA. A day's walk from Kolti, in Sapata VDC, a visitor opens the food cupboard in Maghi Dhami's house to find only a few utensils at the bottom. Across the dim windowless room, a few of Dhami's 10 children lean against the only other visible furniture -- another empty cupboard. "Some days the children eat wild vegetables, some days they sleep without food," their mother says.

The nearest health post is a three-hour walk away but the nurse is on leave for training and the doctor attends only when convenient, explains a local development worker. The villages' men, women and children assemble on a large ledge overlooking the winding Karnali far below. "Long-term development is needed here," says one man, to applause from his neighbours. "The irrigation canal is too far away; one should be made closer," he adds.

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Empty talk while war rages

CAUGHT between the rivalry of the Alps and the Jura I have been shuttling from one to the other on a daily basis, spending the bulk of my low budget vacation hiking in the mountains when weather permits. Try as I might it is impossible to shake off the BBC and CNN, those twin guardians of current events, harkening me back to the real world. Eventually, I gave up the struggle and succumbed to the power of visual images that are shaping our political world as we speak...

Hizbollah, Israel, Lebanon, terrorism... all seemed so far away when perched above the snowline on Aiguille-de-Midi, 4000 metres high, gazing on the snow covered peaks all around me. And what do they have to do with Europe anyway, I asked myself. The answer came the next morning, again courtesy of the twin guardians, that London's Heathrow airport was under threat from terrorists linked to Al Qaida. Over 200,000 people stranded. Many millions reconverted to anti-Islamism. No getting away from it!

Still intent on staying in Europe I switched channels to marvel at the super athletes competing for honours in the 2006 European Championship Games in Gothenburg. So what if there were more than a smattering of black athletes representing their new Caucasian fatherlands. We now live in a globalised world, don't we? Anyway, wasn't it a nice change from constantly seeing them filling menial positions within the occidental social hierarchy. Only when I discovered that Israel had been quietly abducted and mysteriously attached to Europe did I realise that our perception of reality was nothing more than that, perception. Perhaps, they would legitimise Israel's true position soon by offering her a full EU membership. And why not? A huge majority of its current population are of European origin, are they not? Historical geography, what?

Having been thus assured that I would not be straying too far from Europe were I to look at the Israeli-Lebanese standoff, I rushed back to media coverage of events down there. And I say down there because here in the pristine Alps we are untouched by the gore, the spilled guts on the kerbside, the acrid smell of potassium burns, the faux repose of the dead, the broken bodies of the wounded, the wail of the destitute, the confused potpourri of emotions that ranged from fear, hopelessness and murderous anger to revenge. Here in Europe we have decided to intellectualise, debate, negotiate and pontificate - and even fiddle, while providing Israel the additional time it sought to crush its opponents into submission (remember our procrastination in Bosnia a decade ago). And in true European tradition the question will be debated long after Lebanon has risen from the ashes. Moral ambiguity is often resolved by indecision.

The veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (who exposed the My Lai Massacre, abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and most recently, America's plans for Iran) gives us new insight into the events in Lebanon in the current issue of the New Yorker. "Earlier this summer ... several Israeli officials visited Washington, separately, to get a green light for the bombing operation and to find out how much the United States would bear."

Mr Hersh told CNN: "July was a pretext for a major offensive that had been in the works for a long time. Israel's attack was going to be a model for the attack they really want to do. They really want to go after Iran."

So it wasn't really the presented play of kidnapped soldiers by Hizbollah that the world had come to believe as the origin of conflict (BBC and others continue harping on this version long after it has been discredited). But our naiveté knows no bounds. The orchestrated presentations of governments,

media and business have reshaped our thinking in a way that would put Hamelin's rats to shame. Whether the ruling powers are more cynical and wicked or the general populace more stupid will remain the most difficult question of our times (to paraphrase George Orwell's famous observation of the British ruling class in *Homage to Catalonia*, 1938, with apologies).

In response to that question of bewilderment comes the unconscious response in the form of Lincoln's astute observation that you can fool some of the people all the time and all of the people some of the time but you cannot fool all the people all the time. A pattern seems to be emerging, however nebulous, however much submerged by a slick, multi-billion dollars public relations campaign whose din grows louder by the day and whose surreal contrast with the realities on the ground must challenge even the most mentally challenged.

Luckily for the world the occident still has a domestic political structure that is largely democratic. Otherwise, as President GW Bush remarked during his first term in Office, how tiring the democratic process was and that how much easier it would be to execute decisions in a dictatorship. That's why, unlike as in Indonesia, Pakistan or Uzbekistan, expensive, devious and gargantuan plots have to be staged to provide rationale for policies and actions. In democracies power must always justify the wars it wages. I don't know about hearts but it is definitely a battle for the minds of its own constituencies. Short term successes of such carefully crafted orchestrations make the performers believe in their invincibility till such a time when all the pieces of the jigsaw are unconsciously assembled and the larger picture begins to emerge.

The list of incongruities grow by the day. When we have swallowed the incredulous data provided to us by embedded media, from Mohammad Atta's intact passport sitting atop the atomic rubble heap of the imploded Twin Towers on September 11, 2001; Osama Bin Laden and his deputy escaping the Keystone cops on a motorcycle in the mountains of Afghanistan; the complex and elaborate 300 page Patriot Act appearing in the US Congress within days of the 9/11 attack; the 9/11 attack itself - the chronology with all its gaping holes; Iraq and WMD cache; April Glaspie's (the American Ambassador to Iraq) role on the eve of the Kuwaiti invasion; all the way to the present shipment of 400 missiles to Israel via the UK in July 2006, we have to see that all is not what it's said to be.

On the other hand we have these ragtag bands of men across the planet who have chosen to put up a resistance to the invasion of their lands and their rights. Ironically for a large number of them there is a common element - their religion (Islam). Take that away and they are human beings like human beings everywhere, fighting for their very existence. The worst among them are beginning to lose their own humanity, and as Nietzsche warned, in fighting monsters are themselves becoming monsters. Else they are being used as political weapons by outsiders (Kashmir being an excellent example). It would be nobler to choose the Gandhian path and profess that should one believe in one's cause sufficiently one should rather give one's life for that cause than take another's. But do I dare say that to a Palestinian who has just buried his seven-year-old daughter shot by a callous IDF sniper and who could point to the token remnants of the native American tribes in North America, the Aborigines of Australia, the Maoris of New Zealand or even the Jews of Poland... At the end it is only those who believe in total non-violence who can preach it to others - and how many of them are there?

LETTER FROM EUROPE



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

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Terrorism and the guy next door

RAM GIDOOMAL



Through NR Eyes

LAST month I began writing my column, with reflections one year on from the London bombings of 7/7 – only to be listening to breaking news about the Mumbai train blasts. And this month, as I write, the news in the UK has been dominated by an alleged terrorist plot to blow up nine passenger planes with the mass murder of thousands of innocent civilians over the Atlantic – the thought of which sends a shudder down my spine.

In the wake of the 11th September terrorist attacks on New York and Washington it was widely presumed that the threat to our societies came from outsiders. But the major terrorist threat today seems to be different. We are seeing British nationals who have lived all their lives in the UK orchestrating these plots. Plots that involve making explosives from chemicals that can be easily

acquired and taken on board planes in hand baggage with minimum risk of detection. These are not industrial scale conspiracies but plots that have taken root in home based small groups.

In Britain it is becoming clearer, as the facts begin to unfold, that what we are dealing with is a home-grown terrorist threat. As one editorial column put it: 'to talk up a seamless, global conspiracy stretching from Afghanistan to High Wycombe, as our Prime Minister has with his "arc of extremism", is dangerous... The idea that these people are motivated primarily by "hatred of our freedom", as George Bush argued, is deeply misleading.'

Among the suspects arrested were a taxi-driver, a pizza delivery man and a dealer in used cars. They were family people with young children and pregnant wives, living in ordinary towns and typical suburbs like High Wycombe (a market town between London and Oxford). To relax, they watch cricket and football, meet friends and worship at the local mosque. On the surface their lives seem to be entirely ordinary and unexceptional. Most show little indication that they have signed up to the distorted ideology of radical Islam, with its millennial ideology of bringing destruction to the corrupt West.

The question that keeps recurring is 'Why is Britain such a breeding ground for these young men?', for that is what most of them are – just young men!

Some point to Britain's foreign policy. Following the tragic events of 7/7, Inayat Bunglawala, the assistant secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain, was appointed by the Home Secretary to con-

vene a working group on tackling extremism and radicalisation. In its final report, the group accepted that extremism was a reality in some sections of the Muslim community and that it must be confronted and defeated. But it also made it clear that foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, could not be ruled out as a contributory factor in the motivations of extremists. However, a letter to one of the national newspapers made a very interesting counter-point: "Since Thursday's news, I have heard two proclaimed British Muslim leaders attempting to explain radicalisation. On offer as an explanation was extreme hostility towards British foreign policy. Neither was challenged by any statement that it is unacceptable for an elected government's policy to be met with violence if that policy does not accord with a minority view". The challenge of course is how to get these disaffected youth, and for that matter any young people, to engage with a political process that so many are increasingly alienated from.

The diaspora has also been established as a key and integral element of global terrorism. The role of NRI charities funding terror groups was highlighted by the Indian Prime Minister as a contributory factor in the Mumbai train blasts. In the current crisis, the tip off about the plot to blow up planes came from the Pakistani Government. Most of the men arrested came from families of Pakistani descent. At least four had spent time in madrassas in that country. Pakistan's *Daily Times* newspaper reported that what first alerted intelligence agencies to the Pakistani side of the plot was the transfer of huge sums of money from the UK to three men in Pakistan, two of them British, disguised as donations for Kashmir earthquake relief work. According to the Pakistani newspaper it was the British who first noticed this and alerted the Pakistanis.

Some have argued that because so many British Muslims originate from this region, their attitudes, loyalties, prejudices and religious affiliations are inevitable coloured by the Pakistani experience. This line of reasoning could explain how Al-Qaeda, who find it easy to recruit in the slums of Karachi, are also finding it easy to exploit the potential of disaffected Muslim British youth from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and recruit them into becoming militants for their cause.

Unravelling the terrorist links between Britain and Pakistan is clearly an important part of the process of attempting to understand and tackle this terrorist threat, as is the sharing of intelligence and cooperation between the British and Pakistani intelligence services. India's role here is also important, with its own bitter experience of terrorist attacks.

But unravelling the mindset that has induced seemingly well-balanced young men to perpetrate atrocities that deny everything their religion supposedly



(Continued on page 29)

Child labour won't just disappear

MILINDO CHAKRABARTI



Reforms Report

HAVE you ever met Chhotku? Maybe yes, maybe no. Chhotku can be found in the compartment of any train plying through Bandel, a busy railway station between Howrah and Burdwan. No, he does not sell *sabji-puri*. Nor is he keen to polish your shoes. He does not beg either. He is there with a broom to clean the floor of your compartment. Perhaps you threw cigarette butts or wrappers after munching *kurkures*.

Chhotku is happy to be of help. He will sweep the floor clean and come back with a small pair of outstretched hands asking for a couple of coins just in case you would like to pay. Maybe you hand him a few coins just to get rid of him. Fortunately, Chhotku does not claim large fees for services rendered. You may refuse to pay anything. Chhotku won't complain. He is not strong

enough to force you to pay!

Chhotku is about 10 years old. He lives in a shanty near Lalbaba Ashram in Bandel with his mother and three siblings Rahul, Raja and Puja. Rahul, who is about six years old, goes to a free primary school. The others are too young. Their mother, Anjali, works as a maid in a nearby household and earns Rs 300 a month.

Till recently Chhotku was also going to school. His father ran a teashop and the family was somehow sustaining itself. As luck would have it, his father abandoned his mother and began living with another lady. Chhotku had no option but to say a sad goodbye to school and pick up the broom instead.

He was in Class 2 then. Since the last two years Chhotku has been sweeping compartments without fail. As a gruelling day ends, Chhotku is richer by around Rs 25 or Rs 30 and is happy to hand over the money to his mother. Recently, he started collecting discarded bottles of packaged drinking water. Each one fetches Rs 2. Chhotku has a dream. If he is able to save some money, he will open a teashop with his mother. Is he loved most by his mother? Does he get to sleep close to her? I could not ask him these questions. He was too busy moving on to the next compartment.

Chhotkus are omnipresent. Their presence lowers the Human Development Index of the country. We are concerned about the image that it creates about India in the globalised world. The Central government designed a programme called the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*. A considerable sum has been committed to ensure that Chhotkus are brought back to school. The state governments are pitching in with a smaller share of funds. After all a successful campaign to bring children back into classrooms is a sine qua non for the achievement of the "Millennium Development Goals" that the global community has set for itself.

This is not enough. Concerted efforts are on to ensure that child labour is abolished. Recently, 'The Working Children (Rescue, Rehabilitation and Welfare) Bill,' was passed as an Act by Parliament. It seeks to "provide for the identification of children employed in industries, occupations, households and establishments, eateries etc., for rescuing them from such employment and for their proper rehabilitation and for welfare measures to be undertaken by the State through education, training and such other measures for the rescued

working children and for matters connected herewith and incidental thereto."

After the commencement of this Act, anyone who employs or compels any child below the age of 15 years to work, will be punished with imprisonment for a period of four to seven years and fined up to one lakh rupees. The State, on the other hand, will 'rescue' the existing group of working children and provide them with necessary educational facilities to develop their human capital base and make children capable of earning a decent livelihood when they attain adulthood.

The intentions are quite good. However, a lot of questions remain. Will the Act, if implemented in its letter and spirit, help hapless children like Chhotku? Will his mother be able to provide two square meals a day to herself and all her children if Chhotku is rescued and sent to a "reformation school"? What if his mother is imprisoned for 'compelling' her minor son to work? Will Chhotku's siblings also have to first join the 'reserve army of child labour' to derive the benefits of governmental benefits aimed at their skill enhancement? The answers are hard to find.

We can never dream of a situation where dear little members of our family have to leave school and become child labourers. Why does a little kid like Chhotku join the 'labour market'? While enumerating the statement of objectives and reasons behind the Bill, it was mentioned, "At school going age and when it's time to enjoy childhood these hapless children are forced to work from a very tender age either for their own survival or to support their poor families. Many a time parents who are alcoholics, drug addicts, or gamblers force their wards to work. These unfortunate children remain illiterate and exploited...."

In the course of more than half a century of nation building we have tried to abolish many social evils by enacting scores of laws. Legislations were enacted to abolish zamindari. The success rate is not so encouraging. Banks were nationalised with the ostensible objective of abolishing usurious village moneylenders. They still largely rule the roost in rural India. The Forest Conservation Act was passed to abolish mostly the practice of conversion of forestland to non-forest use. It is doubtful if these objectives have been met. Strict acts were implemented to abolish Sati and dowry. The front pages of newspapers are replete with stories about women being killed for dowry. There is still sporadic mention of women committing sati.

One wonders if attempts to abolish child labour will meet the same fate. The plight of Chhotku is far more complicated. Nobody employed him. He is self-employed. Will he be considered a child labourer and hence be rehabilitated?

Any attempt to abolish a social evil will not be successful if we fail to identify the root cause behind such unwanted phenomenon. Dowry-related deaths result from gender inequality and lack of women's empowerment. Likewise child labour is the result of a highly skewed distribution of resources among the citizens of our country. Instead of attacking the symptoms and looking for abolition-centric measures that finally put the blame for non-achievement of objectives on lack of 'political will', it's time we thought in terms of affirmative action and struck at the root cause.

If we are still obsessed with 'abolition', how about legislating a bill called the "Abolition of Poverty Act"? If successfully implemented, it will surely take care of most of the evils we are concerned about.

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Terrorism and the guy next door

(Continued from page 28)

enjoins will take longer. And this quest is especially urgent.

The challenge for Britain is how to engage with young British Muslims and minimise the risk of future terrorist attacks. The scale of the problem and the time needed should not be underestimated. It will require Muslims to be alert to extremists in their ranks and be prepared to identify them to the police. It will mean Muslims becoming intolerant of their radical mullahs and hounding them out of their mosques. The authorities will need to take stronger measures to crack down on extremists in universities and in prisons, to close down internet sites and bookshops that spread hate and violence and to take all reasonable measures to protect innocent citizens and civilians.

The real key is for Muslims in Britain to realise that their future lies in their

chosen home, to embrace British values and reject violent Islamist theology. As Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, author of 'The London Bombings: An independent Inquiry' says, 'all of us must be clear that extremist Islam is a well-funded and sophisticated lie, much like the Western imperialism it purports to resist'.

Behind this lies another challenge for civil society and citizens as they deal with the risk of terrorist attacks. French terrorism expert Roland Jacquard neatly sums it up: "The secondary concern of all terror plots has always been the secondary impact of attacks – getting democracies and free societies so frenzied to prevent new attacks that we start eroding and violating the very freedoms and liberties that the authors of terrorism themselves want to destroy... There will always be holes. One hundred percent security does not exist. We can do everything possible or viable to increase our security, but cutting off your arm because you hand risks gangrene is going too far."

The question is: How do you know when you have gone far enough?

Ram Gidoomal CBE Chairman, South Asian Development Partnership

Police leaders can stop custodial

YATEENDRA SINGH



Police Reforms

CUSTODIAL torture is universally held as one of the cruelest forms of human rights abuse. The Constitution of India, the Supreme Court, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the United Nations forbid it. But the police across the country defy these institutions.

According to the Supreme Court, "Custodial violence, torture and abuse of police power are not peculiar to this country but it is widespread." The Law Commission of India reports: "While in police custody, third degree methods are employed to extract information or confession." The NHRC states: "Regrettably, a situation has developed in which those who should be the protectors of such rights are, too often, the predators. The vast number of complaints received by the Commission each year alleging the violation of human rights by

police personnel provides melancholy testimony to this."

The fact is that policing methods have not changed in India because the core values, attitudes and behaviour of the police remain archaic, rough and brutish.

In 1854, the Torture Commission recorded:

"Among the principal tortures in vogue in police cases, we find the following: twisting a rope tightly around the entire arm or leg so as to impede circulation; lifting up by the moustache; suspending by arms while tied behind the back; searing with hot iron; placing scratching insects such as caterpillar, beetle, on the navel, scrotum and other sensitive parts; dipping in wells and rivers till the party is half-suffocated; squeezing the testicles; beating with sticks; prevention of sleep; nipping the flesh with pincers; putting pepper or red chillies in the eyes or introducing them in the private parts of men and women; these cruelties occasionally persevere until death sooner or later ensues"

And this is how the police in modern India behave:

- "Prisoners have reported being beaten while suspended from the ceiling with their hands tied behind their backs, and, in some cases, being given electric shock. They have claimed to have been beaten all over, including on the soles of the feet, and that they had their legs stretched wide apart and chillies stuck up the anus" (Amnesty International, 1988).
- "My legs were stretched apart and hands tied behind in the police post. The SI (Sub-Inspector) climbed on my thighs. I was tortured and molested by the ASI (Assistant Sub-Inspector), the Head Constable and two other men. My head was dipped in water several times. My son, Rajesh Kumar, was compelled to disrobe me. I was kept in wrongful confinement for three days." (The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations' report on Devki Rani, a victim of police torture in Punjab, 1998).

The Supreme Court also substantiates this pattern of police behaviour:

- "...we have frequently dealt with cases of atrocity and brutality practiced by some over-zealous police officers resorting to inhuman, barbaric, archaic and drastic method of treating the suspects in their anxiety to collect evidence by hook or by crook and wrenching a decision in their favour."
- "The concern which was shown in Raghbir Singh's case more than two decades back seems to have fallen to deaf ears and the situation does not seem to be showing any noticeable change.... The dehumanising torture, assault and death in custody which have assumed alarming proportions raise serious questions about the credibility of the rule of law and administration of the criminal justice system...This Court has in a large number of cases expressed concern at the atrocities perpetrated by the protectors of law."

Sociologists, academics, researchers and police officers attribute the continuing use of third degree methods to various causative factors. These include corruption and extortion, lack of investigative skills, broad powers of arrest, public approval of the use of physical force, demands for instant punishment due to failure of the criminal justice system and belief among policemen that punitive action will not be taken against torturers. There is also the discriminatory attitude of police officials who protect those in power and are themselves prone to torturing socially and economically vulnerable members of society.

A former police officer believes that police brutality springs from a number of factors. These are: public pressure on the police for prompt detection of crime and instant justice, difficulty in getting evidence against offenders and the propensity of a politicised and corrupt police to use violence for supporting the ends of political bosses and corruption. Also, the vast discretion available to

police officials to use their powers in 'out of view' situations encourages violence-prone officials to resort to brutality in isolated circumstances.

Another former police officer attributes police brutality to the existence of systemic compulsions where policemen, under severe pressure from extra-legal influences, view themselves as judge, jury and executioner. There is also tacit support for their actions by senior police officers, bureaucrats, politicians and the judiciary.

An empirical study finds that the practice of custodial violence continues on account of the problems, constraints and occupational dilemmas of the police. They face pressure from their political masters and the public to resort to questionable and extra-legal methods particularly against terrorists and dreaded criminals. There is lack of skill in scientific investigation and the abuse of force is used as a tool of governance rather than as an instrument of law.

A deeper analysis of documented cases indicates that there is a pattern of reckless or wilful abuse of force. The habit of abusing police powers is ingrained among policemen in general. Torture is practiced for professional objectives-- as an investigative tool and to maim or kill criminals for controlling crime. It is also

A research study found that the practice of custodial torture is a part of police culture. The police believe it to be an efficacious method and are reluctant to use scientific methods of investigation

used for vengeance, greed and other ulterior purposes. The organisational culture of the police fosters this practice and supervisory officers are generally apathetic to police torture. Many of them, in fact, conceal it.

These reasons for custodial torture can be grouped under four rubrics: police culture, abuse of police powers for personal or ulterior purposes, leadership apathy and poor training.

Police Culture: Organisations have two levels of culture. The observable culture is the one that the outsiders see, including language, dress and overt activities. Underneath is the core culture comprising of the values and beliefs that guide behaviour. The core culture is the informal component of a police organisation and it impacts its occupational and operational environment.

Research shows that the informal organisation influences the behaviour of policemen more than the formal, observable organisation. Attitudes are shaped by one's fellow officers. Recruits soon learn from their seniors and peers that what is taught in police academies is somewhat irrelevant to their work on the street. Another study shows that the consensus in police departments is that the police cannot function efficiently if officers follow rules and procedures strictly.

The same is true about the police in India. A research study found that the practice of custodial torture is a part of police culture. The police believe it to be an efficacious method and are reluctant to use scientific methods of investigation. The following observations of the Supreme Court also imply that a culture of brutality exists in the police and a false sense of camaraderie masks police torture:

"No police life style which relies more on fists than wits, on torture more than on culture can control crime because means boomerang on ends and re-fuel the vice which it seeks to extinguish. Secondly, the State must re-educate the constabulary out of their sadistic arts and inculcate a respect for a human person – a process, which must begin more by example than by precept if the lower rungs are really to emulate. Thirdly, if any policemen are found to have misconducted themselves, no sense of police solidarity or in-service comity should induce the authorities to hide the crime. Condign action, quickly taken,



torture, if they really want to

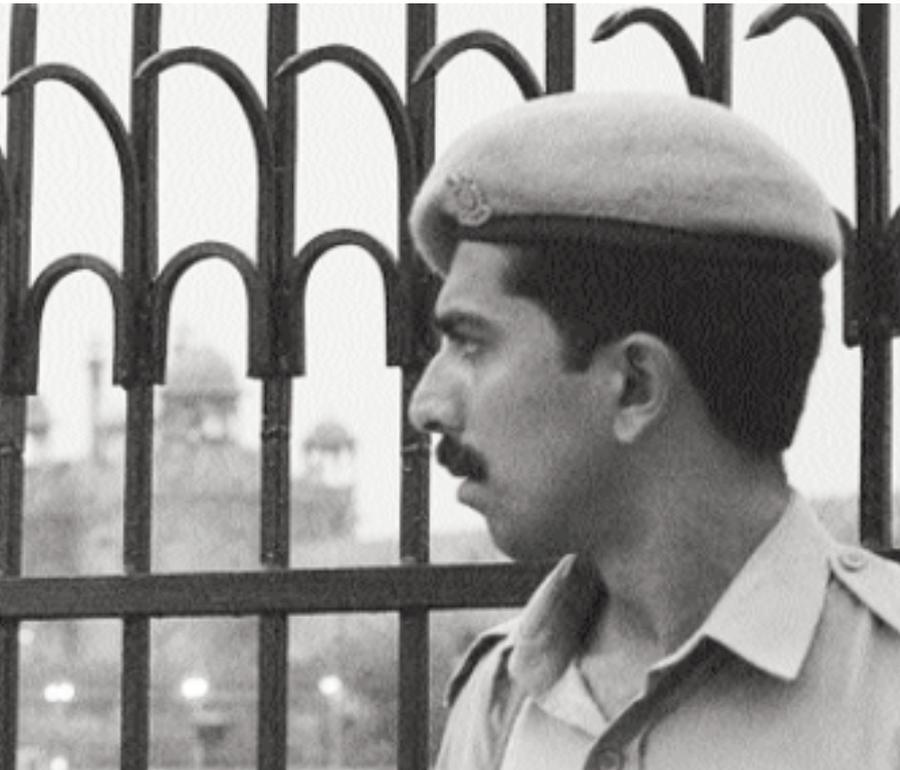
is a surer guarantee of community credence than bruited about that "all is well with the police, the critics are always wrong."

Exactly how the culture of the police influences their behaviour is clear from this report: "In their own perception, the policemen feel that they are doing a job. They resort to torture for 'professional objectives' - to extract information or a confession in order to solve a case; in order to recover stolen property or weapons of offence; in order to unearth other crime that an arrested hardened criminal may have committed; in order to ascertain the whereabouts of other criminals; and in order to locate hideouts.... another 'professional objective' of the police often follows, which is, to terminate the criminality of a professional criminal who could be a burglar, a robber or a gangster, or even a terrorist...by maiming him, by making him lame, rendering him incapable of further crime."

The brutalisation of policemen begins during their training, where uncouth trainers abuse and bully the young recruits, who in turn start behaving in a similar fashion. During this writer's training at the National Police Academy, the chief drill instructor used filthy language on the parade ground, every day. While on the firing range, he exhorted us with: "You shoot only to kill."

As bad habits are easy to acquire, the impressionable young Indian Police Service trainees saw his "tough cop" image as a role model, and imbibed his

LAKSHMAN ANAND



profane vocabulary and bullying manner. So overpowering was his influence on these officers that this attitude became second nature for most of them throughout their career. The brutalisation at the training school is reinforced during actual service. The majority of police officials use abusive language and high-handedness towards their own subordinates and the public. Even police-women, who are by nature supposed to be more compassionate than men, become brutal after serving for some years in the police. One example is the assault unleashed by a woman sub-inspector in Meerut on a young couple on 21 December 2005.

Abuse of Police powers: Custodial violence, whether for police investigation, raping women, extracting money, or other illegal purposes, is basically an abuse of the police powers of detention, interrogation and arrest. According to the assessment of the third National Police Commission, 60 percent of arrests were unnecessary, often made on mere suspicion in a routine manner and even with ulterior motives and for vengeance.

In a public interest litigation case (PIL) pending in the Supreme Court, the NHRC pleads: "The power of arrest now available to the police is often misused to harass and humiliate persons in several situations prompted by malafide considerations. Some malafide arrests get exposed in habeas corpus petitions filed in High Courts, but such exposures are very small as compared to the large number of unjustified arrests that take place all the time." How the police torture innocent persons to serve partisan interests was revealed in a Supreme Court case (1995), where the police tortured a married woman, her husband and family members in their illegal custody in order to frighten her into abandoning her legal marriage.

Leadership Apathy: An empirical study found that superior officers regarded police violence as an efficacious tactic for crime control and maintenance of order. They ignored police torture or justified it on grounds that it was prevalent in every country. Senior officers want results, irrespective of the means employed.

Thus, the pressure on subordinate police officials from their bosses for detecting and solving criminal cases fosters the practice of custodial violence. Supervisory officers often conceal cases of police torture, indicating a tacit understanding within the organisation to hide the magnitude of this practice so that the organisation does not get a bad name.

Therefore, cases of police torture are projected as individual aberrations done by errant police officials. Deaths in police custody, described as accidents or suicides, do not ever disturb their conscience. In his 36 years of service, this author did not see a single meeting of senior officers where police torture was ever discussed. When the police departments internally investigate such cases, they generally condone or lightly punish the guilty officials.

This indifferent or collusive attitude of senior officers has fostered a pervasive tendency to use coercive and violent tactics. The malaise flourishes, as subordinate officials know that they can get away with their misdeeds. Consequently, as the Supreme Court says, "Police excesses and the maltreatment of detainees/under-trial prisoners or suspects encourages the men in 'khaki' to consider themselves to be above the law and sometimes even to become the law unto themselves."

Poor Training: Research shows that formal police training influences police behaviour and operational tactics, as it inculcates among recruits professional skills, knowledge of law and legal procedures and respect for human rights. The callous and punitive environment of police training institutions is by itself enough to make brutes out of young recruits. Police training methods in India are antiquated. Generally incompetent, unwanted and disgruntled personnel are posted to the police training institutions. The use of brutal tactics, at the very least, is proof of lack of professionalism.

Poor training manifests itself in lack of investigative policing skills. It fosters the habit of adopting the easy method of using brute force to extract confessions. There is an obsession with obtaining confessions, for which torture is used. One study finds that untrained and inefficient police officers use third degree methods with greater frequency. Training is an organisation's human resource development endeavour and the direct responsibility of police leaders. But they neglect police training by posting useless instructors and starving the training schools of modern teaching aids.

Solutions: In the final analysis, persistent brutal police tactics are essentially an organisational problem fostered by the apathy of police leaders to their subordinates' mischief, their neglect of police training, and their lack of supervisory control.

As KPS Gill says, the police system is based on antiquated systems and ideas of crime control. Primitive policing practices are reflected in poor rates of conviction, deteriorating inefficiency and effectiveness, and consequently in a declining respect for the law. "This is the essence of the malady. Brutality and corruption, while they are enormously distressing, are only the superficial symptoms of the loss of control."

In an empirical study, 50 anonymous officers of the IPS, who answered the researcher's questionnaire, made 14 suggestions for eliminating the use of third degree methods from police investigations. Eleven of these were for internal reform within police organisations. The recommendations include better training, scientific investigation, stoppage of illegal detention by the police, doing away with excessive reliance on crime statistics as the sole indicator of police performance, sensitising police officials to human rights, better supervision over investigations, implementation of Supreme Court directives on the treatment of arrested persons and reduction in the number of arrests made.

This survey shows that police officers, without admitting it, know that the practice of police torture is an organisational problem and that its solution can be found within the organisation. Any external controls, such as scrutiny by the NHRC and occasional judicial punishments, would always remain a weak deterrent. If police leaders will it, they can curb the practice of torture.

Therefore, what the Supreme Court enjoins is the solution: "The State, at the highest administrative and political levels, we hope, will organise special strategies to prevent and punish brutality by police methodologies....These observations have become necessary to impress upon the State police echelons the urgency of stamping out the vice of 'third degree' from the investigative armoury of the police."

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A spicy bite of Marathi food

Purba Kalita
Jodhpur

ON the culinary map of India, Maharashtra is well poised between north and south India. Both roti and rice are liked. And the cuisine gets spicier and spicier as one traverses the state.

The cooking medium is groundnut oil, an all-time favourite. Compared to many other cuisines, Maharashtrian food does not use excessive oil. But the liberal use of peanuts and oodles of coconut seem to make up for that.

An intriguing and essential ingredient in Maharashtrian food is kala masala or black spice mixture. The mixture appears black because, most often, spices like cumin seeds, coriander seeds, white sesame seeds, big cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, peppercorns, dry coconut, bay leaves, turmeric, asafoetida chunks, dagad phool (star anise), masala phool and poppy seeds are roasted and ground.

But there are variations. In Khandesh, we are told people prefer not to add red chillies so that the masala-mix retains its black colour. In Kolhapuri cuisine loads of fried red chillies, brown and crisply fried chopped onions, fresh garlic and rock salt are ground and added to the kala masala which is stored for a whole year or more. In Khandesh, crispy sun-dried sliced onions are used. They are stored in air-tight containers and come handy when onion prices shoot up. Onions are crushed by hand and used like fresh onions.

Sprouted beans are very popular. Usal is one such wholesome, dry preparation, usually made with small brown beans called matki. But whole green beans and Bengal gram too can be used. Stuffed brinjal is a delicacy, so is lady's finger.

Breakfast is usually not stressed but poha or flattened rice is popular. It is made using onions, salt, sugar, roasted or fried peanuts, garnished with coriander, dry coconut and served with a wedge of lime.

Lunch could mean varan bhaat or yellow split peas seasoned very lightly or made spicy with coconut, cumin, garlic paste, tempered with curry leaves and added to steamed rice topped with clarified butter. You would also find on the table, dry and curried vegetable dishes, garlic chutney, koshimbir, which is a salad of cucumber with roasted and coarsely ground peanuts, a raita preparation, papad and sweets.

In fact papads are a must for every meal. A variety of papads are made once a year and stocked for months.

Naagli papad is made from ragi or finger millet, kurdai papad from whole wheat and there are others made of sorghum and pearl millet. Khichdi is usually served for dinner.

Puran poli, a stuffed delicacy of split Bengal gram and jaggery is made during festivals like Makar Sankranti and Ganesh Chaturthi. It is a must during Pola, a bullock festival in Khandesh. Modaks or steamed dumplings are very important during Ganesh Chaturthi as they are considered to be the Lord's favourite dish.

Puran Poli

Ingredients

Fine whole wheat flour: 2 cups

Turmeric: ¼ tsp

Salt: ¼ tsp

Oil: 1 ½ tsp

For stuffing

Bengal gram dal: 1 bowl

Jaggery: 1 bowl, grated

Method: Knead flour into soft dough with water, oil, turmeric and salt. Keep it covered for 2 hours using wet cloth to make dough softer. Boil dal till just done. Mix jaggery and dal over fire in a pan till mixture is dry. Keep it aside. Make small balls of dough and roll out two small rotis. Place small quantity of mixture on one and place other roti on top. Press edges to conceal properly. Sprinkle dry flour on board and roll out stuffed roti till it occupies complete space. Take roti in hand and expand it the way one does for rumali roti or fine flat whole wheat bread. Cook roti on a khapar which looks like an overturned earthen pot with a big base. When done, fold roti from all four sides to make a rectangle. Roll in further. Serve by breaking into two parts. Enjoyed best with aamras or mango puree, kheer, thickened milk or clarified butter. Variation: In Khandesh, puran poli is made without oil. Elsewhere, once the edges are sealed, the roti is rolled out only a bit and then directly placed on a tawa and cooked with ghee like a parantha.

Bharli Vaangi

Ingredients

Baby (green) brinjals: 250 gm

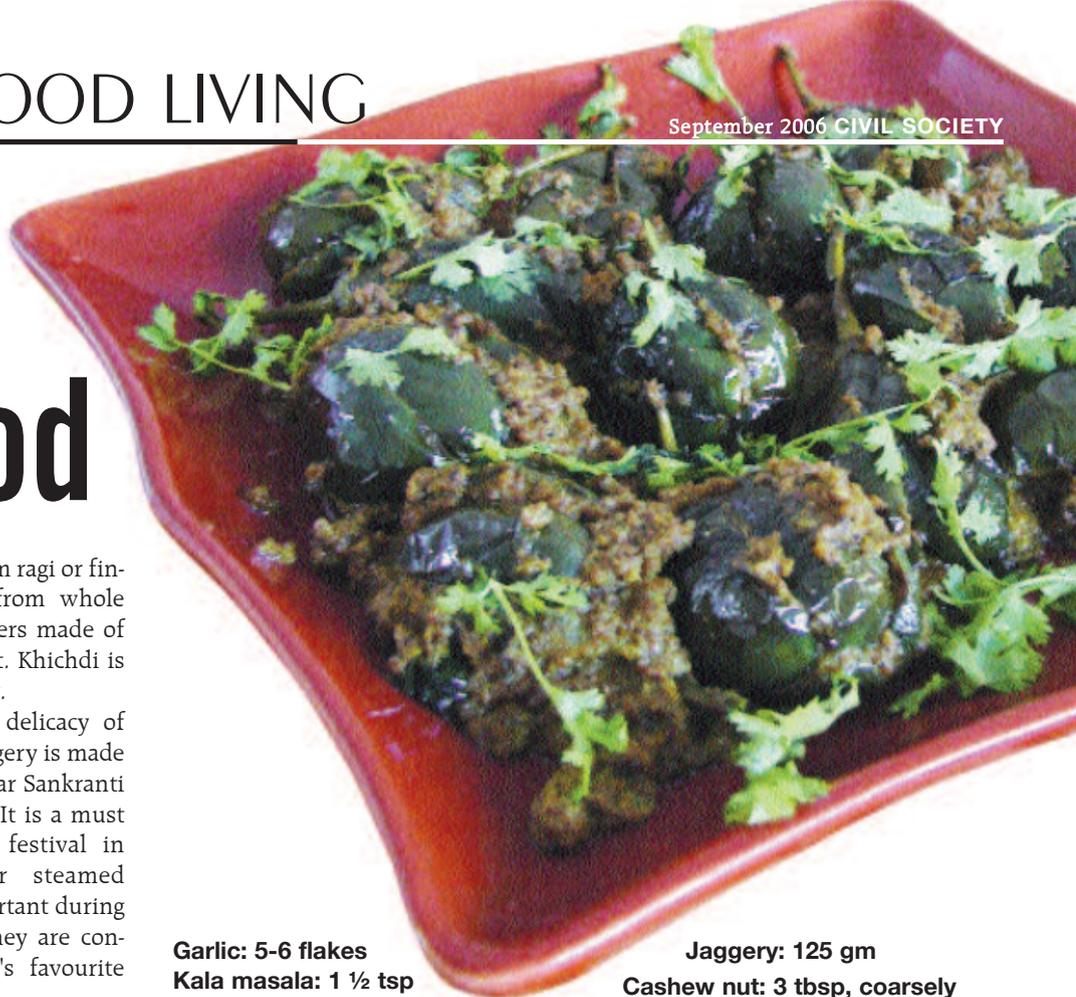
Oil: 2 tbsp

For filling

Peanuts: half bowl, roasted, skinned, ground

Dry coconut: ½ bowl, grated, roasted

Coriander leaves: 1 bunch



Garlic: 5-6 flakes

Kala masala: 1 ½ tsp

Red chilli powder: 1 tsp

Salt to taste

Method: Slit brinjals into four parts attached to stalk. Dip in water for sometime. Mix all filling ingredients. Fill brinjals with mixture. Heat oil in kadai. Add stuffed brinjals. Stir and add remaining mixture with one cup water. After a while add one cup boiling water and cook on full flame. Later, keep it half covered and cook on low flame for 10 minutes. In Khandesh, people leave a pan half covered while cooking. This opening, they feel, does not allow much water to fall back into the food so that when the food is done, one finds a thick red layer of oil and spices on the surface - a symbol of well-cooked and delicious food.

Matki Usal

Ingredients

Sprouts: 500 gm

Onions: 4, finely chopped

Tomatoes: 2, chopped

Oil: 2 tbsp

Mustard seed: ½ tsp

Cumin seeds: ½ tsp

Kala masala: 2 tsp

Roasted peanuts: 3 tbsp, ground

Salt to taste

Method: Soak beans in the morning. By evening, drain water and tie beans in cloth. Keep aside or use a sprout maker. Next morning the beans should have sprouted. Heat oil. Splutter mustard and cumin seeds. Add onions and tomato. Fry till a smooth texture appears. Add sprouts, kala masala, peanuts and salt. Cover and cook for 15-20 minutes.

Modak

Ingredients:

Whole wheat flour: 250 gm

Salt: ¼ tsp

Hot oil: 1 tbsp

For stuffing

Fresh coconut: 1, grated or ground

Jaggery: 125 gm

Cashew nut: 3 tbsp, coarsely ground (optional)

Cardamom powder: 1 tsp

Method: Knead flour with water, oil and salt. Cook jaggery and coconut over low flame. Jaggery will melt and form a lumpy mixture. Mix cashew nuts and cardamom. Roll out small puris and fill with small portions of mixture. Seal in shape of balls with little knob on top, resembling a fresh fig. Steam for 15 minutes.

Bhakadwadi

Ingredients:

Flour: 1 cup

Gram flour: 2 cups

Carom (ajwain): 1 tsp

Hot oil: 4 tbsp Pinch of salt

Red chilli powder: 1 tsp

Soda: ¼ tsp Oil for frying

For filling

Dry coconut: 250 gm, one half ground, other half grated

Garam masala: 1 tbsp

Poppy seeds: 1 bowl

Sesame seeds: 100 gm

Kala masala: 1 tbsp

Turmeric: ½ tsp

Coriander: 1 bunch, finely chopped

Green chillies: 2-4

Garlic-ginger paste: 1 tsp

Dried mango powder (aamchur) or lemon juice: 1 tsp Salt to taste

Method: Knead flour with water, oil, salt, carom, red chilli powder and soda. Roast poppy, sesame seeds and grind together coarsely. Mix with rest of ingredients for filling. Make four big portions of dough. Roll out each as a big thin roti. Apply little oil on roti and spread out filling. Sprinkle grated coconut on top. Roll in roti and cut into slices of 2 inch each. Steam slices and deep fry when cool.

Calm mind, sound sleep

Dr G G GANGADHARAN



A Rig Veda rhyme starts with a prayer to the Lord asking for 100 years of a healthy and joyful life (satham jeevama sharada). Astrology (jyotishshastra) considers 120 years as the full life span of a human being so that all planets can complete a circle in a person's life. The idea is to live a long life, healthily. To achieve this objective, Ayurveda proposes a lifestyle which is in tune with the rhythm of the body and its external environment. The chapters on daily routine (dinacharya) and seasonal routine (ritucharya) in Ayurveda textbooks are devoted to this aspect.

To live long one needs to regulate body physiology so that the ageing process is delayed to the maximum extent. This can be done by strengthening, to the optimum, cellular absorption of the nutrient constituents and elimination of the toxic byproducts of the metabolism.

There are three phases in a human life (see box). The first phase is dominated by regeneration and growth represented by Kapha. The second is of growth, stabilisation and optimum activity, represented by Pitha. The third phase is of degeneration dominated by Vatha. This is the chronobiology of growth in a human being.

Kapha dominates till the age of 30. Pitha dominates between 31 and 60 and Vatha dominates between 61 and 100. This age bracket can pre-start depending on one's Prakrithi - (body constitution), Desha (place of birth) and Bala (internal strength). So, one may get into the old age bracket at 50 or 55 and a person's middle age (madhyavastha) can start even before 30.

The age of degeneration is old age (Vridhavasta). This is the time when all the Dhatus (tissues) are in a state of losing their contents or are unable to add to their mass or volume. Osteoporosis in women is a good example of age related tissue erosion (Dhathu Kshaya). In old age all physiological functions are at a low. When Vatha increases, Kapha, that has the opposite qualities, decreases. Kapha, which is unctuous and stable, is the factor which causes sleep. Infants and newborn babies sleep almost 24 hours. Sleep time gradually decreases as the Kapha in the body decreases and in old age even four hours of sleep is sufficient.

Another good example that shows the importance of Kapha in sleep is day time sleep. Especially in winter, day time sleep increases as Kapha predominates in this season. Day sleep is allowed only in summer when Kapha is minimum and the body needs to increase its Kapha component to balance the accumulation of Vatha due to the hot season.

The Ayurvedic approach to insomnia is to increase Kapha in the body especially the Thrapaka Kapha that resides in brain tissues in terms of its quality, quantity

and action.

Kapha can be increased by three methods - (1) Kapha increasing substances (2) Kapha increasing qualities and (3) Kapha increasing actions (dravya guna and karma). Basically, the Ayurvedic approach is to calm down the mind and balance the Kapha. Even though Kapha is present in every body cell, its place of predominance is in the chest, head and joints. The objective of the Ayurvedic treatment of insomnia is to increase and activate Kapha in the head.

By consuming food substances that are Kapha predominant, Kapha can be made to increase. For instance, by consuming as the first food of the day rice mixed with buttermilk and kept overnight. This is an excellent Kapha enhancing food. It is the staple diet of farmers and labourers who have to toil hard doing physical activities for a long time. Food with equivalent qualities of Kapha like milk and milk products, stem and stigma of lotus processed in butter; plantains cooked and dressed with ghee are all good examples.

Long and mild oil massages with Kapha increasing and Vatha decreasing oil, a bath in lukewarm and aromatic water; use of aromatic and glandular flowers of white and mild colour ensure an increase in Kapha.

The Ayurvedic management of any diseases or health conditions has three aspects. They are: Oushadham- (medicine), Anna (food), and Vihara (lifestyle). These are the factors that constitute Ayurvedic treatment.

A medicine to work to its optimum potential needs a congenial internal environment in the body. So in all Ayurvedic treatments physicians insist on pathya, or dietary regulations and lifestyle changes. In insomnia if there is no other complication like diabetes or blood pressure and no mental worries bothering the patient, the following advice would be typical for its management.

In the morning wash your head half an hour after applying hair oil (use hair oil prepared with gooseberry, bhringaraj or brahmi). Consume sufficient food items that are unctuous, easily digestible, fresh and fibrous. Foods such as whole-wheat

There are three major phases in human life

| PHASE I | |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| Balyam Childhood | 0 - 6 yrs |
| Kaumaram Adolescence | 7 - 16 yrs |
| Youvannam Youth | 16 - 30 yrs |
| PHASE II | |
| Madhyamam Middle Age | 31 - 60 yrs |
| PHASE III | |
| Vardhakayam Old Age | 61 - 100 yrs |

gram, leafy vegetables and other vegetables are good for sleep. Buffaloes' milk is an excellent sleep-inducing agent. One cup (100 ml) of this warm milk mixed with one teaspoon of fresh butter when taken at bedtime helps induce sleep. For those who do not get sleep, it is better to have slightly heavy food at night. Washing your legs with cold water for five minutes before bedtime is also helpful.

The most important thing is to calm the mind or withdraw the mind from wild thinking. This can be achieved by constant practice of deep measured breathing (pranayama) at bedtime. Medicines like Manasamitra Vatakam crushed, powdered and mixed with warm milk are also helpful. Ashwagandharishtam (30 ml.) after dinner is useful in this condition.

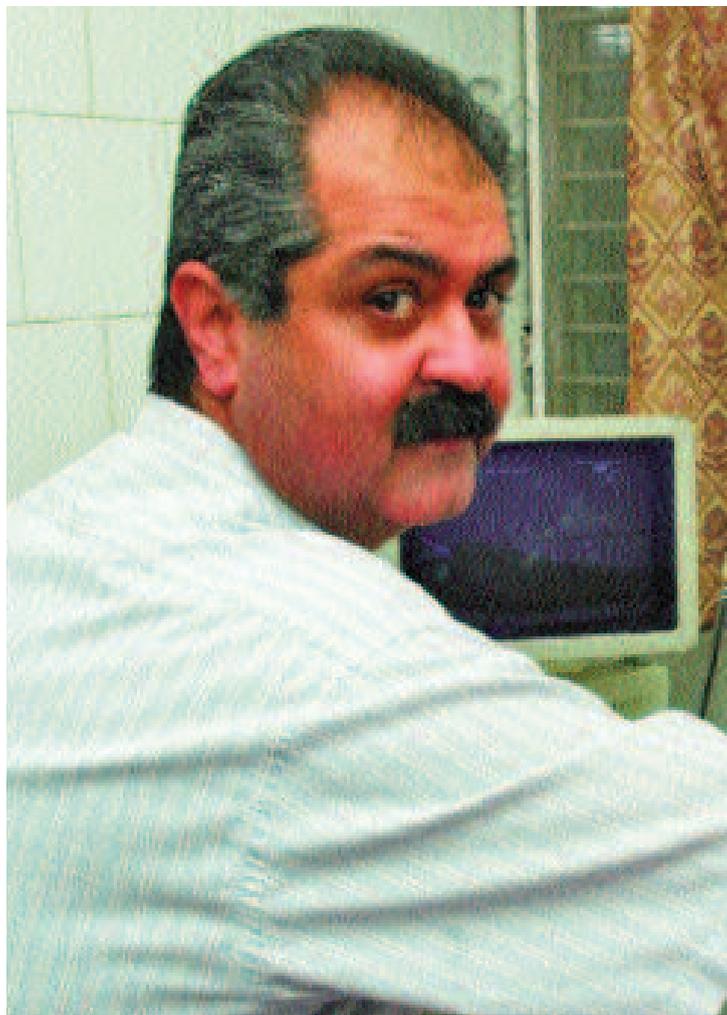
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Still from Hariye Jai Manush, an adaptation of Albert Camus' The Just.



Still from Ashvacharit.

Small town theatre gets loyal audience

Trina Nileena Banerjee
Kalyani

KALYANI is just another nondescript town in West Bengal. You wouldn't dash off there to holiday. It's unlikely you'd be sent there on work either. In fact, you would need a damn good reason to go to Kalyani at all.

Well, how about a path breaking theatre festival in the pleasant month of December?

Every year the town helps a local theatre group, the Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra to organise a 10-day theatre festival called the Kalyani Natyotshav. Tickets are booked beforehand and sold out before the festival begins.

Groups from all over West Bengal stage thirteen plays. Even theatre troupes from Kolkata, the big city, mark their presence.

This year the festival opens with Tritiyo Sutra's Raktakarabi. Directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay, this is Rabindranath Tagore's best known play.

The credit for making theatre so special in Kalyani goes to the Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra, a group of 42 actors. Five work full time. The rest are home-makers, students and surprisingly government officials.

"We are a comparatively young group," says Santanu Jha, president of the Kendra. "We started working in Kalyani about 11 years ago with a theatre festival which we organised in the month of December. I remember we went with tickets to people's homes - trying to push-sell what we could, trying to convince them that watching a few plays on winter evenings would not be such a bad idea. And now, a decade later, all the tickets for the shows are booked."

The group was started to make serious theatre trendy in Kalyani, a town where such performances did not take place. And today the people of Kalyani make sure that every December their holiday season coincides with the theatre festival.

"It is the community in this town that supports us, both financially and morally. Without the community support that we have managed to garner,

all this would not have been possible," says Jha.

One reason why the Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra has attracted a deeply loyal audience is its canny choice of subjects. Theatre, believes director Kishore Sengupta, should be politically relevant and entertaining. It should vie with populist media to grab the attention of the people.

So in choosing plays his first preference is for a story of conflict-dramatic, intense and tightly narrated. 'Will it hold the audience's interest?' is the primary question he asks.

That's why in 1997 when the Kalyani

"I remember we went with tickets to people's homes, trying to convince them that watching a few plays on winter evenings would not be such a bad idea. And now, a decade later, all tickets for shows are booked"



Kishore Sengupta

Natyacharcha Kendra staged their first production they chose a play that would ring a bell with the audience. Bangladesh was celebrating 25 years of independence. The Kendra performed Chilekothar Shepai (The Soldier in the Attic) an adaptation of a novel written by Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas in 1987. The story is set in Dhaka in 1969, against the backdrop of the people's uprising. The production was a deft portrayal of a man's difficult psychological journey at a time of political unrest, with all its twists and turns.

Directed by veteran actor Gautam Halder, the evocative sets were created by legendary stage designer Khaled Chaudhuri. The play received accolades even in Kolkata where they performed a year later. The group went on to stage many more productions, one after another. Kolkata's audience sat up and took note.

The Kendra's next venture was Nakshi Kanthar

Math (2000), which ran for more than 55 shows in Kolkata and elsewhere. Based on a verse narrative by the poet Jasimuddin, Nakshi Kanthar Math was a simple tale of love and strife. It tells the tragic story of Shaju and Rupa, a farmer and his wife, whose lives are torn asunder by violence. The dramatisation of this novel required a theatrical form that would be faithful to the rustic innocence of Jasimuddin's story yet modern enough to interest contemporary audiences. The production achieved this with ease and shows ran on till 2003.

The group then staged Ashvacharit (2002) and Dashyu Kenaram (2005). But perhaps the Kendra's most important production till date has been Ilyas's Khwabnama (2004). Broadly set in pre-partition rural Bengal the story grapples with the complexities of the Tebhaga Peasants' Movement.

The community rather than the individual hero emerges as the protagonist. This sense of a suffering multitude was what the Kendra was able to create visually on stage in a dramatised version of this text. It was a theatrical challenge but Kishore Sengupta, as director, emerged with flying colours.

Khwabnama was widely praised. Says Sengupta, "

Besides the politics of the play, which was undeniably relevant, I found the magic realist form extremely exciting to translate on stage. Only the light changes, and you are transported from one time and space in history to another, effortlessly. That's the magic of the stage."

The Kendra's current production, Hariye Jai Manush is also imbedded with new ideas. It is an adaptation of Albert Camus' play, The Just (1949), a story about the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905.

Sengupta has skilfully tailored this complex text to reflect contemporary

West Bengal. He transports us to a world of young revolutionaries, living in hiding.

We see them plotting to kill the head of the local police force. The play makes references to the contemporary Maoist movement in Bengal, raising difficult questions about extremism, the nature of revolution and the definition of political freedom.

The play has already received rave reviews and is being hailed as one of the best new productions on the Kolkata stage. It seems that nothing can now stop this small town troupe from making a dramatic inroad into the big city. But Jha remains modest about his group's achievements. "We are proud that, if nothing else, we have managed to make theatre popular among the people here," he says.

Contact: Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra B-12/53 (S), P.O. Kalyani, Pin- 741235, West Bengal E-mail: knck@rediffmail.com Ph:9433145356

'A book is entertainment'

Hirsh Sawhney
London

THE world was introduced to **Hanif Kureishi** in 1985 when the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* debuted. The screenplay he wrote shed fresh light on class, race and sexuality in Thatcher's London and was nominated for an Oscar. Unpretentious and exhilarating, his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* infused English literature with the rhythm of popular culture and the stories of UK's South Asian communities, several years later.

Kureishi next explored the proliferation of radical Islam in the UK before turning to the fallout of middle age and the inner world of individuals. Upon discovering one of his father's unpublished novels, the author adeptly meditated on the connection between family, writing and life in *My Ear at His Heart*.

Hirsh Sawhney spoke with him at a café near his home in London over the summer.

In your collection of essays, *Dreaming and Scheming*, you asked: "Who would you write like if you were liberated from the necessity of being yourself?" Is the contemporary publishing world receptive to this type of writing?

I don't really think about the commercial or publishing world or what other people want. I write for myself as I see fit. And I try and encourage writers, when I'm teaching, to work like that. There's something about your own voice that has a sort of power.

Is the best writing from a very private part of our individuality?

Well, the best speaking, the best writing and the most authentic stuff is the stuff that's most urgent. You meet someone on the street, grab them and say, "I really want to tell you something; it's very important that you know this." When I was very isolated in the suburbs because of race and my family and the fascism in the street and all the shit I was going through, it seemed very important that I said these things to other people, so they would know me and they would understand.

It seems like the family in your novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* dramatically differs from your actual family as depicted in *My Ear at His Heart*. How come?

As you read *The Buddha*, you think that these guys have a good time all the time. They take drugs, go to parties and have sex. Actually, I spent most of my time in my bedroom reading books, studying and listening to music. So when you make a story, you take the good parts and jam them together and hope that this would be of interest to other people. I think most novels, stories or essays are about moments of breakdown. Stuff starts to go wrong or crazy. To make a story, you need something dramatic. (But) the drama in my family was very slow. We'd stay at home and we were together and we'd love one another and watch TV together. That's not a novel. So to make a novel, you throw a bomb in it. You say, "What would happen if...?" The autobiography thing is much more tenuous than you would think. *The Buddha* really began to work when I stopped writing about my real family and began to make up another family.

So a narrative must seduce.

That's what you're doing. I said I wasn't particularly aware of an audience, but I'm aware that I'm making something for other people I guess. I'm not just telling somebody a dream.

I'm not sure I see that distinction.

Well it's the difference between writing as therapy and writing as art. If I tell somebody a dream, it may relieve me to get it off my chest. But I'm not giving them entertainment. Whereas a book is entertainment.

So a book that you produce for other people to read is art rather than therapy. It is art in the sense that it's a manufactured concept which I hope will appeal to



other people. I don't write only to make myself feel better.

In your earlier works – *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Buddha*, *Black Album* – you were very concerned about what was going on here in England.

They're books about race; they're books about radical Islam; they're books about what's going on in this society. My childhood was to deal with being a Paki. I was a Paki; our family was the Paki Family. That had a profound effect on me. So, my position in the world, as anybody's position, is dictated by social circumstances.

In works like *Intimacy* or *The Body* you became much more concerned with the individual – psychology and aging. Why did you retreat from the Paki thing?

I couldn't think of anything new to say about that. I was no longer a Paki – I was a writer. I was living in a different kind of world by then. And you have to find new subjects. If you're a decent writer, you have to renew yourself over and over. You search around you, and you have other things to say. You're not a Paki to your wife.

You write, "I needed to believe that knowing certain things about the self was curative." Is writing a process of attaining knowledge about yourself?

I guess so. It's very odd because when you feel disturbed or distressed, it's as though you want to get to the source of it. And it's as though you believe that when you get to the source of it, or express it, that you'll be free in some way. When you're a teenager or in your twenties, you begin to feel disturbed about stuff, and your relationships break down and fail in ways that you don't understand. So you begin to look inside to find the source of the disturbance. You begin to write about this, and then you make a story out of it. Perhaps you feel some relief in knowing what the sources of the disturbance are.

I guess all Western literature is an attempt to search the self. Who am I? What is inside of me? How did my parents make me? How much of myself is me and how much is them? These are the deepest questions and important questions, and they're also curative. Somehow we believe self-knowledge – and this is the Socratic idea – is curative.

So then there is a certain amount of writing as therapy in your life.

I certainly write to understand what it is to be a son, what it is to be a father. What it is to live in a world where there is radical Islam. Whether this works as therapy I can't answer. But certainly there's the impulse to find out – to know the self, to know other people. I think this is a deep impulse, and it's part of the creative impulse.

Why aren't you sure if it works or not?

Well, if it works, you'd think that writers would be the most therapised – the most chilled people. But there's no reason to think that Philip Roth is more chilled than he was 30 years ago.

Are you more chilled than you were 30 years ago?

I guess I may be (laughs). I wouldn't know what I would be like otherwise. I might be an axe murderer.

Much of *My Ear at His Heart* deals with the parent-child relationship. Are we chained to our parental upbringing?

Well we are, but what's interesting is the way in which we're chained to our parental upbringing. *My Ear at His Heart* was an attempt to try and come to terms with my upbringing as a 50-year-old. And you come to terms with it when you're 10, when you're 20 and when you're 40 in different ways. You continue to think about your parents – what they've done to you and what they haven't done to you – over and over.

It's an endless process of revision and understanding. I thought, when I

wrote that book, I would forget about my dad. And now dad comes back in other ways all the time. We're haunted by these relationships. I think what we need to do is to make a space in our heads in order to think about them. The writing represents the space where there isn't just a relationship, (but) where there is time for contemplation, thought and meditation on your childhood.

Is being a celebrity a part of your life?

I have a bit of that, but not very much. It would be a nightmare and really uncomfortable. One of the things that happened (in the 80s) was that corporations started to sell writers as celebrities. A writer should try and resist that. You don't want to walk down the street and have people go, "look, there's Hanif Kureishi." You want to walk down the street and look at everybody else. So the less celebrity I have, the more I can see what's going on without disturbance. I want to be an observer, as I was as a kid. If you're a writer your anonymity – your ability to look at the world without being looked at – is very important.

You wrote: "One feels jaded and played, out as well as fulfilled in certain ways... No one should want, at fifty, that which they wanted at thirty. Do you have a new set of goals?"

I still want to write and there are other things that seem very important for me to say. I'm struggling to be a father to my kids and get them through their teenage years. There are pleasures – countries I want to visit, things I want to think and say. I feel jaded often. It takes a lot to turn me on – to get me going. I think having experience after a certain age – to find excitement, to find interest – you've really got to dig it out.

When did you start to feel jaded?

“ The best writing and the most authentic stuff is the stuff that's most urgent. You meet someone on the street, grab them and say, "I really want to tell you something; it's very important ”

I guess in the last ten years. I think it's when I stopped believing that I could be cured. I used to think, if I took a lot of cocaine or if I had enough sex – or if I did this or I did that – it would make me feel much better all the time. But when I stopped believing that, I realised that life will always be a struggle and quite difficult.

Visiting the home of an immigrant in this neighbourhood, you write: "A prayer mat is next to his bed; he shows me his Koran and his Labour Party membership card..."

Oh Abdullah. I'm sure he'll walk around here in a bit.

Abdullah decided to leave Labour when it "started bombing the Muslims." Do you empathise with his decision?

Yeah, I no longer vote Labour. In 1997 when Labour came to power, I think a lot of people in my generation thought that this was our turn. "Look at that guy, he's our age, he likes rock and roll. He's a liberal hippie leftie." And there's been a long process of deep disillusionment. I certainly feel like the war in Iraq is a disaster.

So when a Muslim guy in London says, "The UK is bombing Muslims, and I'm indignant about that," you can see that.

I wouldn't see it from a Muslim point of view. I would see it from the point of view of a very wealthy country bombing a lot of poor people into debt. And for no measurable benefit for them at all, as Bush and Blair seemed to acknowledge last night as they stared into the wasteland of hopelessness that they've created. It's very difficult, because I do identify with other Muslim people. Yet Islam is a religion I don't accept. There's much about Islam I really despise...

Are we talking about problems of Islam or problems of religion in general?

I would say the concept of truth is very dangerous. And the idea that the truth is contained in the Koran – being the word of God – is very dangerous. Subservience is very dangerous, because it stops thinking. There's always a moral authority who is greater than you, whose ideas oppress you. But I don't think it's only Islam that's dangerous. All forms of religious omnipotence are. In that sense Marxism and Fascism are dangerous.

Shakespeare is in the Park

Shuktara Lal

New York

SUMMER in New York brings with it a variety of live performances that people can watch, free of charge. The most popular offering in this eclectic platter is the annual 'Shakespeare in the Park' festival.

Now into its 50th year, the festival was originally started by theatre director, Joseph Papp with the objective of showcasing the works of Shakespeare to an audience regardless of their economic or cultural background.

In the years to follow, keeping Papp's vision in mind, 'Shakespeare in the Park' has presented high quality productions of plays by Shakespeare and other acclaimed playwrights, without charging a penny for tickets. The festival has theatrical performances by noted film personalities like Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, Liev Schreiber, Jeff Goldblum and Patrick Stewart.

This year's plays – Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Brecht's *Mother Courage* – were consciously selected keeping the current political climate in mind. "This year, we are at war; in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in a vaguely defined war on terror. Both the productions in the park this summer speak to a country and a world at war..." stated Oskar Eustis and Mara Manus, artistic and executive directors of The Public Theatre (the producers of the festival) in their programme note.

It is *Mother Courage* that has sparked more interest primarily because of its exceptionally talented set of artistes. Directed by George C Wolfe, the production uses a new translation of Brecht's text by Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Tony Kushner. The cast includes Meryl Streep in the title role and Kevin Kline. Both are regular performers at 'Shakespeare in the Park.'

Set against the backdrop of the Thirty Years War, *Mother Courage* traces the life of a mother and her children during this period. At the heart of the play is Mother Courage's ambivalent relationship with the war: she seeks to profit by following soldiers and selling goods to them, but she also goes through the trauma of losing her children to the war.

Kushner draws subtle parallels between the war described by Brecht and the war encircling us today, and in doing so he is perhaps far more scathing. There are implicit comparisons between "the king" as delineated by Brecht and Bush. Equating the war with "business" is another recurrent leitmotif. Scattered through the script are lines that are uncannily relevant to our political milieu. Thus one of the sergeants observes: "The problem with these people is they haven't had enough war." Later, Streep, as Mother Courage declares: "The war is going well. New countries join everyday. It should last five years at least." While the audience applauded all these implicit jibes, the comment that was appreciated the most was made by Kline as the cook: "Liberty's expensive. Especially when you start exporting it to other countries."

The open-air stage conveyed barrenness and devastation. It contrasted with the lush greenery of Central Park. But what the production was most successful in achieving was Brecht's theatrical device of alienation. Brecht strove to make the audience always conscious that they were watching a play to prevent them from sympathising with its characters. As Mother Courage, Streep brought in this sense of alienation with remarkable ease.

While 'Shakespeare in the Park' is free for all, there are a limited number of passes available. People queue up from early morning to collect these. Hours spent waiting to get the much coveted ticket becomes an extension of watching the performance. Itzhak Beery, who has been coming to the festival for the past 20 years, says: "There was one year when people started forming lines the night before the play was to be staged. The best thing about the festival is that it truly is a beautiful community event."



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Phone: 26227647

Association for India's Development (AID) – Delhi Chapter

AID works for the environment, children, women's issues, education, and health. They also undertake fund raising. Contact: Anuj Grover
B-121, MIG Flats, Phase-IV,
Ashok Vihar Delhi- 110052
Phone: 9818248459
E-mail: anuj.grover@gmail.com

Youthreach

A volunteer team at Youthreach helps to match your skills and interests with the needs of their partner organisations. This exchange is monitored and facilitated from beginning to end by the volunteer team. The team also partners other non-profit organisations that are working with children, women and the environment. Contact: Anubha or Ria 11

Community Centre, Saket,
New Delhi - 110 017
Phone/Fax: (011) 2653
3520/25/30
Email : yrd@youthreachindia.org

Deepalaya

They work with economically, socially deprived, physically and mentally challenged children. They believe in helping children become self reliant and lead a healthy life. Deepalaya works on education, health, skill training and income enhancement. Contact: Deepalaya 46, Institutional Area, D Block Janakpuri New Delhi - 110 058
Phone: 25548263, 25590347
Website: www.deepalaya.org

Mobile Crèches

Mobile Crèches pioneered intervention into the lives of migrant construction workers by introducing the mobile crèche where working parents can leave their children. They work in the following areas: health, education, community outreach, networking and advocacy, resource mobilisation and communication. You can volunteer by filling out a simple form online. Contact: DIZ Area, Raja Bazaar, Sector IV New Delhi -110 001
Phone: 91-11-23347635 / 23363271
Website:
www.mobilecreches.org

The Arpana Trust

Arpana is a charitable, religious and spiritual organisation headquartered in Karnal, Haryana. They work with rural communities in Himachal Pradesh and with slum dwellers in Delhi. Arpana is well known for its work on health. They have

helped organise women into self-help groups. These SHGs make beautiful and intricate items which are marketed by Arpana. For more details: Arpana Community Centre, NS-5, Munirka Marg Street F/9, Next to MTNL, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi-110057.
Phone: (Office) 26151136 and (Resi) 26154964

HelpAge India

HelpAge India needs volunteers from doctors to lay people in all our locations. Older people love to talk to younger people and need emotional support. We require volunteers in Delhi and Chennai to survey older people staying alone in homes, who could use our Helpline for senior citizens. If you wish to volunteer please email Pawan Solanki, manager at pawan.s@helpageindia.org or write to Vikas, volunteer coordinator, HelpAge India.

Hazards Centre

Hazards Centre is a support group involved in environment and urban issues. We seek to challenge all such processes (hazards) that undermine the rights of marginalised groups in the city. In alliance with these groups, we advocate for alternate planning frameworks that can counter the forces aiming to create sanitised and commercialised cities, devoid of the poor who build and run them. You can volunteer with us as per your time, interest and skills on issues such as Housing, Livelihoods, Pollution, Waste, Transport, Right to Information, Development Communication etc. Contact: Supriya Chotani
92-H, Third Floor, Pratap Market
Munirka Village, Delhi - 67

WHERE TO DONATE

Indian Red Cross Society

The society provides relief, hospital services, maternity and child welfare, family welfare, nursing and community services. Contact: Red Cross Bhavan
Golf Links
New Delhi-110003
Phone: 24618915, 24617531

Child Relief and You (CRY)

CRY, a premier child rights organisation, believes that every child is entitled to survival, protection, development and participation. You can sponsor a child's education, healthcare, or a health worker and a teacher. Website: www.cry.org

Community Aid and Sponsorship Program (CASP)

CASP enhances the capacities of children, families and communities through participation and advocacy leading to sustainable development and empowerment. You can help by sponsoring underprivileged child/children from any work area where CASP implements its programmes. These include building old-age homes, projects relating to AIDS etc. Website: www.caspindia.org

ActionAid

ActionAid is an international development organisation which works with poor and marginalised women, men, girls and boys to eradicate poverty, injustice and inequity. You can become a part of their Karma Mitra loyalty program, which is based on the concept 'When you do good things you should get good things in return.' As a member of this program you can avail various tangible benefits. Contact: ActionAid India
C-88, South Extension - II
New Delhi-110 049
Website: www.actionaidindia.org

CanSupport India

Kanak Durga Basti Vikas Kendra,
Sector 12 R.K. Puram
Near DPS School
New Delhi-110022
Tel: 26102851, 26102859, 26102869
E-mail: cansup_india@hotmail.com

HelpAge India

HelpAge India is involved in the care of the poor and disadvantaged elderly in 55 locations across the country. They organise primary health care at village and slum level through 53 mobile medical vans, care of the destitute elderly through Adopt a Grand programme with 222 voluntary agencies, Helplines and income generation for the elderly. Their recent programmes are in the tsunami affected regions and in Kashmir for the rehabilitation of the elderly affected by the earthquake disaster. HelpAge serve more than a million elderly in India. If you wish to donate or adopt a granny, please donate online on our site www.helpageindia.org or send an email to helpage@nde.vsnl.net.in
Address: HelpAge India
C-14 Qutub Institutional Area
New Delhi- 110016
Chief Executive: Mathew Cherian - mathew.cherian@helpageindia.org

Bharatiya Academy

The Eco Development Foundation and the Soni Foundation Trust have set up the Bharatiya Academy which runs a school for underprivileged children and for children of defence employees serving on the border who are victims of violence and war. The school is located in Tashipur, Roorkee, Hardwar district and has 115 children on its rolls. The school requires money for buildings and sponsors for the children. Temporary buildings have been made by the Bengal Sappers regiment. Teachers are also required. Contact: Soni Foundation Trust,
F-2655 Palam Vihar, Gurgaon,
Haryana-122017
E-mail: kcjecodev@rediffmail.com
Phone: 0124-2360422

Are you ready for Bt Brinjal?

Would you like to be made a guinea pig of a big experiment without your consent and knowledge?

Brinjal originated in India and has been cultivated for more than 4000 years. Delicacies like *baigan bartha*, *masala baigan* and *aloo baigan* are made in millions of Indian households daily. But the first ever genetically modified (GM) food crop, Bt Brinjal is all set to reach the Indian kitchens thanks to Monsanto-Mahyco!!

The Government of India is planning to give permission to Monsanto-Mahyco to start large-scale field trials of genetically modified Bt Brinjal. It would be the first time that permission to a GM Food Crop would be granted. The disturbing fact is that Bt Brinjal has not even been tested as per the requirement. And other food crops such as mustard, potato and tomato would follow soon.

What is Bt Brinjal? Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) Brinjal is a genetically modified plant. Among other harmful chemicals it also has a toxic protein (Cry1Ac), a virus promoter (Ca MV 355) and an antibiotic resistance marker (npt 11 gene).

How can Bt Brinjal harm your health and the environment? This decision will have far-reaching implications for agriculture and health. So far, Bt Cotton is the only genetically modified (GM) seed sold in India. In the four years since it has been in use, not only has it failed to live up to its claim of being a 'miracle seed', but it has also had harmful effects on biosafety.

The experiment with Bt Cotton has produced contentious results in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. It appears that the same set of tests carried out when Bt Cotton was introduced in the country is now being applied to Bt Brinjal.

The tests were essentially devised by Monsanto; the company has claimed that the Bt cottonseed it supplied to India was safe. However, reports from the States in which Bt Cotton was introduced have indicated that the tests against effects on human health were not as foolproof as claimed by the

company. A recent study in Madhya Pradesh that farm workers exposed to Bt Cotton had allergies including skin eruptions and swollen faces. More recently, reports from Andhra Pradesh indicated a rise in sheep mortality after grazing on Bt cotton.

Various studies have established that the Bt gene is a known toxin that affects human and livestock health adversely. The recombinant Cry1Ac protein in the Bt gene is a powerful immunogen and when fed to mice, induced antibody responses, similar to those obtained with the cholera toxin. Research also showed that the protein actively binds to the inner surface of the mouse's small intestine, contrary to the common belief that Cry proteins do not affect mammals since they supposedly do not have receptors that bind the truncated toxin in the gut.

The Ca MV 355 Virus used as a promoter in Bt Brinjal is known to initiate transcriptional activity in human cells. There is a danger of the promoter reactivating dormant viruses, raising concerns related to cancers. This promoter is known to be especially unstable. Studies worldwide have shown that eating GM food can result in wasteful growth of gut tissues and bacterial proliferation, intestinal tumours, immune system suppression and interference with the development of the body's vital organs.

Genetically modified plants can harm the environment and biodiversity. Once out in the fields, there is no way of knowing whether normal plant varieties have been contaminated by the GM variety through pollination, which could lead to the extinction of local crop varieties. Moreover, the Cry1Ac gene affects butterflies and moths and alters soil microbiology. Farmers using Bt cotton in India report decline in soil productivity.

Given these results the consequences of trials with a food crop – a vegetable crop that will be consumed directly – are unimaginable. Japan and several European countries have banned cultivation of GM food crops. But India is allowing it entry without taking adequate precautions.



FOOD ALERT